THE JEWS OF IRAQ

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Foreword

The brutal hangings of alleged spies on the public square of Baghdad have suddenly and dramatically focused world attention upon the tiny Jewish community of Iraq. As eerie light fell upon the bodies dangling from the gallows, governments, churches and individuals, Jews and gentiles, sent expressions of their horror to the government of Iraq. Mass meetings were held all over the world. More often than not it was there that Jews heard for the first time about the Jews of Iraq. As everything in our fast moving time, the term "the hangings of Iraq" became a political slogan, and very few Jews indeed realized that we were speaking of a Jewish community, the remnant of which was still living "by the rivers of Babylon." Very few identified Iraq with Babylon, and fewer still associated that country with one of the greatest and most glorious chapters of Jewish history.

The purpose of this essay is to project the hangings of 1969 against the multi-colored background of Jewish creativity in a country that changed so many hands, experienced so many trials and triumphs since the days when our forefathers were taken into captivity in the sixth century before the Common Era. There they built a community which was of such grandeur and such unparalleled consequences for the spiritual life of our people that it ranks only second to the splendor of Jerusalem and overshadows the Golden Era of Spain.

If "current events" are to be of historic significance, they must be woven into the fabric of Jewish history and understood in terms of such historic memory and continuity. The stark contrast between the spiritual and material wealth of the Babylonian Jew and the misery and isolation of the Jew now in Iraq illustrates the drama of Jewish deterioration, the disappearance from the earth of the direct inheritors of an erstwhile Jewish Renaissance. It is this dramatic development with which the following pages are concerned.

Joachim Prinz,
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THE JEWS OF IRAQ

Introduction

"The aim of this work is to give a concise and fairly popular account of the history of the Jews in the place of my ancestors." [1/] In this simple and unpretentious way, David Solomon Sassoon, himself the bearer of one of the great names of Eastern Jewry, begins to recite a history of Jews in Baghdad. It is a history which encapsulates as does no other the range of Jewish experience under Arab rule, from grandeur and rich achievement to tragedy and ultimate dissolution. The country we know today as Iraq was variously known during ancient and Biblical times as Babylonia and Mesopotamia. Beginning with the Babylonian Exile in 586 B.C. and extending through the early years of the twentieth century, Sassoon tells the story of the Jews of Baghad.

He tells the story of its beginnings; it is left to us to tell of its ending. The Jews who were exiled by Nebuchadnezzar and wept by the rivers of Babylon produced a Jewish community which provided the people of Israel with intellectual and spiritual resources for generations. It was a community so prestigious and proud that David Sassoon, writing twenty-five hundred years after the Babylonian Captivity, could list among

1/ A History of the Jews in Baghdad, David Solomon Sassoon, Letchworth, 1949, p. vi.

the far flung outposts of Iraqi Jewry not only Hong Kong, Sydney and Bombay, but Jerusalem itself.

Nonetheless, the intellectual outpouring of Iraqi Jewry is still relatively unknown throughout the world. Despite its seminal importance for Jewish life, this remarkable era of Jewish creativity remains a recondite page of world history. One of our purposes here is to provide a brief account of the enormous impact of this small community upon the whole shape and contour of the Jewish experience. Another is to describe its present plight.

It is the burden of our time to bear witness to the final phase of this segment of Diaspora. Less than thirty years after the European holocaust the world of which even Sassoon could still feel himself to be a part had entirely vanished. The creative stage of Iraqi Jewish life ended twenty years ago with a mass evacuation of Iraqi Jews to Israel; the very physical survival of those who remained behind is now at stake. The recent brutal slaying and public hangings in Iraq have affronted every notion of decency and humanity. We despair of Jews in Iraq ever again being restored to their full and just rights as citizens. It is plain that the Iraqi government will not allow Jews to live peaceful or quiet lives. Every means is being taken to dispossess them, to make their lives untenable and, finally, to murder them. The only possible hope for the remnant of Iraqi Jewry is their exodus elsewhere. Poland is not the only graveyard of the Jewish people.

This brief paper on the history of the Jewish community of Iraq is, thus, in the nature of an appreciation and a eulogy for a community whose glory can never be reconstituted and will never be forgotten.

> Very few countries in the world have experienced such, and so many, radical changes of empires and rulers as Babylon. Long before the most important European cities were founded, the land between the two rivers saw the rise and fall, the growth and decline of dynasties and nations. Sumer and Akkad, Babylonia and Assyria, Parthians and Medians, Persians and Sassanides are more than mere names. They are indices of changing fortunes and misfortunes, peaceful developments and ruinous battles, material prosperity and intellectual expansion, religious activities and political upheavals during thousands of years. 2/

Nebuchadnezzar's Conquest and the Beginnings of the Babylonian Exile

In 597 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and in 586 B.C. he marched on the city again and destroyed the Temple. "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, King of Judah, came Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon into Jerusalem, and beseiged it." (Daniel) The Babylonian monarch exiled a substantial part of the Jewish population, including the Court, warriors and craftsmen to Babylon, in an attempt to break the cohesion of the rebellious group.

The desolation and fury of the captives is recorded in Psalm 137:

> "By the rivers of Babylon,
> There we sat down, yea, we wept,
> When we remembered Zion...
>
> "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
> Let my right hand forget her cunning.
> 'Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
> If I remember thee not;
> If I set not Jerusalem
> Above my chiefest joy...

2/ Sassoon, p.6.

> O daughter of Babylon, that are to be destroyed;
> Happy shall he be, that repayeth thee
> As thou hast served us.
> Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones
> Against the rock."

In 538, Cyrus, king of Persia, destroyed the ancient empire of Babylon and permitted the exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. As related in the first chapter of Ezra:

> Now in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying: 'Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia; All the kingdoms of the earth hath the LORD, the God of heaven, given me; and He hath charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whosoever there is among you of all His people -- his God be with him -- let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD, the God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem.

Ezra (Ch. 2) then lists the people who went out of Babylon, saying "The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty, besides their menservants and maidservants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven, and they had two hundred mae and female singers." (A similar list is found in Nehemiah, Ch. 7.)

It is clear that only a small minority availed itself of the permission to return. The majority were unwilling to abandon their homes and associations to undertake an arduous and dangerous trip (one estimate is that the journey took three months) whose destination was a city which, if Holy, was far from comfortable, stable or secure.

The Jewish exiles in the valley of the two rivers (Wadi El-Rafidain) had become acclimated to Babylon, a country of large towns, extensive commerce and fertile soil, a land quite different from the

they had left. They were acclimated, but never assimilated, partly no doubt because of the passionate exhortations of the prophets, and particularly Ezekiel.

Two points are significant here, first the reluctance of most of the exiles to return and second, the extraordinary devotion which the exiles showed towards the Holy City for generations, centuries and millenia. As one writer phrases the question: "Cupbearer before Artaxerxes I, born and reared in the fifth generation in the Diaspora, Nehemiah weeps when he hears of the affliction of the children of Israel in Jerusalem. He risks disgrace to obtain royal favor for the Holy City. How are we to explain this unity between the Dispersion and Jerusalem? 3/

However one explains it (and the phenomenon continues, of course, through our own time) it is obvious that those who stayed in Babylon and cherished that land as a home and haven, nonetheless perceived themselves in the context of the destiny and purpose of the people of Israel as a whole. See, for example, some of the homilies of the teachers of the third century C.E., as reported by Sassoon. R. Hiyya, himself a native of Babylon, suggested that "the Holy One, blessed be He, exiled Israel to Babylon because they would not have been able to survive the severe decrees of Rome."

Another native of Babylon, R. Eleazar B. Pedath "saw the cause of the Babylonian exile in a topographical fact, namely that Babylonia is a low lying land and in that it resembles the nether world and from such a land the Jews would soon be redeemed." And,

3/ Elias J. Bickerman, "The Historical Foundations of Postbiblical Judaism" in Finkelstein, The Jews, Vol. I, p. 72 (1949) JPS

a third sage, R. Hanina bar Hamma, suggested that "the reason is that the language of Babylonia is akin to that of the Torah." 4/

The Golden Era - The Attainments of the Babylonian Diaspora

The Jewish community of Babylon maintained close contact with the revitalized Jewish community in Palestine. The two communities, whose scholarly efforts resulted in the two Talmudic compilations which carry their names, provided intellectual cross fertilizations for each other through the centuries.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah left Babylon to assist the work of rebuilding Jerusalem and thus it was Babylonian Jews who were instrumental in establishing the norms and values of Judaism in Palestine. Throughout this early period scholars came out of Babylon, including Hillel ha-Babli (Hillel), Nahum ha-Madi, Nathan ha-Babli and others. In some instances, the flow of population went the other way. Judah b. Bathira and Hananiah, the nephew of R. Joshua b. Hananiah were among the Palestinian scholars who went to Babylon. The Babylonian community received a new influx of Jewish refugees after the destruction of the Second Temple by Titus (70 C.E.) and again following Bar Kochba's unsuccessful revolt in 135 C.E.

With the triumph of Alexander the Great over Darius III (Codomannus) in 331 BCE, the Babylonian Jewish community came under Hellenistic influence. By the middle of the 3rd century BCE what had been Babylon became part of Parthia. At this time, the Jewish community exercised considerable local automony, and there were towns like Nehardea, at the junction of Nahr Malka and the Euphrates which had an almost entirely Jewish population. (The name "Nehardea" is said to come from two Hebrew words, meaning either the light of wisdom or the river of wisdom.)

4/ Sassoon, p. 1 (Aramaic, the language of ancient Babylon is, like Hebrew and Arabic, a semitic language.)

"Natural increase, trade, migrations in the course of seven hundred years added to the numbers of these Jews....By the third century, in other words, Babylonian Jewry was anything but a minor outpost..." 5/ The Jews of the Babylonian Diaspora had courts, synagogues, schools and communal facilities. They were actively engaged in public life and commerce, and the political representative of the Jews, the Exilarch (Resh Galuta, the chief or prince of the Exile) was a dignitary at the Parthian and Persian courts. Though "several Resh Galutas may have left instructions to be buried in the Holy Land, their lives and their revenues and their powers hardly made them consider Babylonia as a place of exile..." 6/

A significant development in the religious and scholarly life of Babylonia Jewry began when Abba, a Babylonian scholar (called Rav) returned from Palestine and established his school in Sura between Nahr Sura and the Euphrates (ca. 219). Another academy was founded at Nehardea under Samuel (like Rav, a disciple of R. Judah ba-Nagi, Judah the Prince, d. 217, a compiler of the Mishnah) and a third school grew up in Pumbarthia.

The advanced state of commerce within the country "inevitably led Jewish scholars to a development of civil law...which their colleagues in Palestine...never attained. The Sages had to respond to the needs of their environment...what was fair competition, what was fair price, what were fair wages. These and similar questions the Babylonian Amoraim undertook to answer in the light of the teachings they had inherited..." 7/

5/ "The Period of the Talmud", Judah Goldin in The Jews, Vol. I, p. 175.

6/ Goldin, pp. 175-176

7/ Goldin, p. 176

It was Samuel of Nehardea who laid down the principle in Jewish law (followed ever since) that "where religious praxis was not involved, the law of the country in which the Jews lived was binding upon Jewish jurists..." 8/

When, by the end of the fifth century, the Babylonian Talmud was finally in its completed form, it represented the life work of seven generations of Babylonian Amoraim (the interpreters of the Mishnah) and Saboraim ("reasoners"). More elaborate and larger than the Palestinian Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud assumed a much greater role in the development of Judaism, and was the foundation and rule of Judaism in every country in which Jews lived.

The Internal Conflict Between the Sacred and the Secular---the Geonim and the Exilarchs

Babylonian Jewry then evolved a new institution, which, though it grew out of the academies, was fundamentally different from them. The new structure was called the Gaonate and the new personage the Gaon. ("Excellency", a reference to the "Excellency of Jacob" in Psalm 47.) The office was effectively hereditary. "What in preceding centuries had been essentially a scholar's forum was now almost literally a Sanhedrin, whose chief not only expressed views but expected his decisions to be enforced, whose personnel's influence was not dependent on talent or erudition but on established prerogative." 9/

The writ of the Geonim ran throughout the Jewish world.

> In the fourth century...Palestine had hardly the intellectual equal of Abaye the Babylonian. Yet

8/ Goldin, pp. 177-178.
9/ Goldin, p. 186

> he had been prepared to concede spiritual hegemony to the Holy Land. In the eighth century, on the other hand, a Babylonian scholar settled in Palestine and undertook to teach his hosts the Babylonian Talmud. Its law was for him the only law to be adopted. And in the tenth century, the Gaon Sherira announced that the words of the Geonim "are the words of the living God...and their learning is verily that which the Lord hath commanded unto Moses. And though they render a decision without accompanying proof, be the matter of great or of little import, they are not to be disobeyed; he who departs from one of their words is like him who disputes the Lord and his Torah. 10/

Over the centuries, there was enormous conflict between the Exilarchs (who traced their lineage to the ancient kings of Judah) and the Geonim, for the line between sacred and secular, political and spiritual is, of course far from clearly defined. To enforce its decisions each could excommunicate and in the course of the bitter conflict (10th c.) between Gaon Saadia and the Exilarch David b. Zakkai, the Exilarch excommunicated Saadia and Saadia excommunicated the Exilarch.

The Islamic Take-Over---The Beginnings of Jewish Life Under Moslem Rule

In a hundred years, Islam extended its rule over Persia and Palestine, North Africa and Spain, and the triumph of the followers of Mohammed (571-632 C.E.) established the conditions of Jewish life in all the Arab countries for the next thirteen centuries. The Moslem Caliphs were faced with the administrative problems inherent in ruling vast numbers of Jewish and Christian subjects and the Pact of Omar was devised fundamentally as a tool for governing large infidel populations. (The text of the Pact of Omar is attached as an Appendix to this memorandum.)

10/ Goldin, p. 187

A basic part of the law of the Moslem theocratic states, the Code considered Jews (and Christians) dhimmis, protected persons; infidels were not citizens, but subjects with a special status. The Code

> ....guarantees to the proteges of Islam the right of life and property, but it also imposes on them a certain number of limitations designed to assure the pre-eminence of Islam and which place protected persons in a position of discriminatory inferiority. The dhimmis, according to Al Mawardi, were to wear a distinctive costume, they were not to build either houses or synagogues which were higher than the dwellings or the mosques of the Moslems. They were subject to supplementary taxes, djizya and kharaj, by which they procured their rights of protection. Finally and most important, they could hold no position of authority in the Moslem community. If then Jews or Christians were admitted as protected persons within Moslem theocracies, their situation was essentially precarious and subject to revocation, and depended above all on the Personality of the Prince. These principles by themselves explain the history of the Jewish communities in Islam. 11/

While at times in some countries Jews could purchase a high degree of governmental toleration by the payment of a tax, at other times and places the code was rigidly and brutally enforced against religious minorities.

The Growing Influence of the Exilarchs

In Mesopotamia, the Jewish community was treated fairly well by the Arabs. The Jews paid the special tax required of infidels, but were otherwise largely left to function autonomously. Increasingly, the Jews moved to urban areas (and particularly to Baghdad, founded in 762 by Al-Mansur, the second Caliph of the Abbassid Dynasty) and Iraq at that time probably contained the largest Jewish community in the world.

11/ Andre Chouraqui Vol. 1, No. 1, "North African Jewry Today," Jewish Journal of Sociology, April 1959, p. 64.

Following the Arab conquest, the Exilarchs, who had resided in Nehardea, Sura and Pumbathitha, the seats of the academies, moved from the province of the Gaonim to the new metropolis. "Being the main political representatives of the Jewish Diaspora in Babylonia, their proper place was more under the shadow of the temporal rulers than in the vicinity of the spiritual guides and elected leaders of the Jewish Communities." 12/ The authority of the Exilarchs was recognized by the Arab rulers of Mesopotamia, and the Exilarch Postanai is believed to have been confirmed in his office by the Caliph Omar in 634.

As a result of the extensive autonomy which the Arabs granted the Jewish Community, the Exilarch became an even more powerful figure. According to the description left by the twelfth century traveller Benjamin of Tudela, the Exilarch was lavishly dressed in the silks and a gold chain appropriate to a potentate. People stood and saluted when he rode by "and all the Mohammedan princes who attend the court of the Caliph rise up before him." 13/

The Jews of Baghdad were very active in the commerce of the 10th century, and the bankers especially were so strong that they could even depose an Exilarch. The wealthy families placed their services at the disposal of the state, and the role of these Jewish bankers is noted in both Jewish and Arabic sources.

In the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries, Baghdad was a center of Eastern culture, and a focal point for the dissemination of the work of the Greek scientists and philosophers. Here, as elsewhere, Jews

12/ Sassoon, p. 8.
13/ Goldin, p. 184.

shared in the task of translating Greek texts into Arabic, thus assisting the diffusion of Greek learning through the Western world and in providing, centuries later, one of the sources of the European Renaissance. John Bar Maserjoye (8th Century) translated the Syntagma of Aaron into Syriac, and presided over a medical school in Baghdad. According to one tradition, Sahl ibn Rabban al-Tabari, a native of Marw (8th century) translated a work by Ptolemy.[14/]

The Contribution of Saadia

At this point, we may also refer to the work of the Egyptian-born Gaon of Sura, Saadia (deceased 942). Briefly, Saadia is credited with being the first systematically to codify Hebrew grammar and lexicography. His poetry is discussed in works on Judeo-Arabic literature. He wrote commentaries on the Talmud and wrote directly on the Books of the Bible. He prepared the first translation of the Bible into Arabic. An uncompromising rationalist in the Greek tradition---"It is not conceivable" he wrote "that honest investigation could have been forbidden us."---he was the first to have undertaken a philosophical examination and exposition of Judaism."[15/]

Saadia was also intensely active in the political-religious struggles of his day. In addition to his battle with the Exilarch (to which we have already referred) Saadia carried on a life-long campaign against the Karaite fundamentalists who rejected the interpreters and insisted on the exclusive authority of Scripture. (The Karaite group still exists, notably in Turkey and Egypt, but is not considered part of the Jewish community.)

14/ Sassoon, pp. 39-40.
15/ Goldin, pp. 194-200.

"With Saadia ben Joseph a new dimension is added to Jewish history. We may seek the climate in which he moved as much as we please; the man towers above every environment with which he was associated."[16] Maimonides said of Saadia: "Were it not for Saadia the Torah would almost have disappeared from the midst of Israel; for it was he who made manifest what was obscure therein; made strong what had been weakened."[17] The age of the Geonim ended essentially in the middle of the 11th century, when dissension between the academies of Sura and Pumbeditha and the conflict between the Geonim and the Exilarchs resulted in the decline of both of these great institutions of Babylonian Jewry. The decay of these institutions was the precursor of the cultural deterioration deterioration of the Jews of Babylonia. Gradually this Jewish community lost its sway over Jewish thought. The decline of Jewish communities in almost all Moslem countries during this period reflected in large part the general cultural decline at this time in the Arab world.

The Mongol Occupation and the Decline of Mesopotamian Jewry

Maimonides (1135-1204), who had lived and worked for years in Arab countries, wrote to the Jews of Lunel, in Southern France:

> "This I have to tell you, that in our difficult times there are none left in Israel who care for the Torah and Talmud except for you and your neighbors. All other places are either dead or dying (as far as the Torah is concerned.) There are three or four decaying centers in Palestine, one in Syria, a few in Babylonia. Little is studied in the Yemen and other Arab countries, although they have acquired three copies of the Mishnah Torah..." [18]

16/ Goldin, p. 194
17/ Goldin, p. 197
18/ Quoted from a translation and paraphrase given in "Israel, the Ever-Dying People", Simon Rawidowicz, Judaism, Fall 1967, p. 426.

As a result, by this time the great centers of Jewish learning and scholarship were shifting to Europe, to the new Jewish settlements which were rising along the Rhine and Dnieper. Nevertheless, the succession to the Exilarch until 1258 when the Mongols, led by a grandson of Genghis Khan, overran Mesopotamia. Hulago Khan, then ruler of Persia, sacked Baghdad and devastated Iraq by destroying the ancient irrigation system. Part of Iraq became swamp and part became desert. The entire period of Mongol rule was destructive and ruinous.

It is interesting to note that even during the course of this savage rule the Monghol Khans employed Jews as their physicians and viziers, and that one Jewish family in Abhar, in the North of Persia, held high office under the Khans for four generations. Sa'ad el Dawlah, whose father, grandfather and greatfather were attached to the Mongol court, was sent to Baghdad in 1284 by Argun Khan, grandson of the Khan who conquered the Abbasids. Sa'ad el Dawlah was Governor of Mesopotamia, and his position and influence is reflected in the following lines of a contemporary poet:

> The Jews of this our time a rank attain,
> To which the Heavens might aspire in vain,
> Theirs is dominion, riches to them cling
> To them belong both Councillor and King."

The poet then says that he hopes to be able to sing of the downfall of the Jews. In fact, Sa'ad el Dawlah did ultimately fall from favor, and another poem tells of the pogrom among the Jews of Baghdad.

> Grim captains made them drink Death's cup of ill,
> Until their skulls the blood-bathed streets did faill,
> And from dwellings seized the wealth they'd gained.
> And the wellguarded women's rooms profaned." 19/

19/ Both poems quoted in Sassoon, p. 93.

The terrible persecution of the Jews of Baghdad at this time decimated the Jewish community. Many died, some were convertrd, and it is assumed that others emigrated.

The Persian-Turkish Wars and the Period of Ottoman Rule

Following the downfall of the Khans, beginning through the sixteenth century and extending for hundreds of years even into the 19th century the Persians and the Turks battled over the lands of Mesopotamia, with the minority populations trapped in the struggle. During a Persian victory (ca. 1508) the entire Christian community of Baghdad was massacred, though not a Jew was touched, largely because (according to a Christian source) the Jews, in this instance backed the Persians.[20/] A later Turkish victory resulted in considerable Jewish immigration and the community again was seriously depleted.[21/] As an official part of the Ottoman Empire, the Jews of Iraq were in no worse condition than other Jews under Turkish rule, and were probably much more secure than the Jews of Western Europe. In the latter half of the 16th century, the traveller Zechariah el-Dahri visited Baghdad and offered the following account of his visit to the Jewish community:

> "I travelled from Hormuz /Persia/ to Babylon, which is situated on the Tigris. I carried 500 musical instruments for sale in order to make joyful the weary and the exiled. After forty days' journey on the sea, I landed in Basra, whence I boarded a boat

20/ Nazhat el-Muzhtag fi Tarieh Yahoud El-Iraq. (Excursion for the Eager into the History of the Jews of Iraq) Juseph Rusk-Allah Ghanima 1924, Baghdad, p. 156. (In Arabic) It is worth noting that Ghanima, referred to his work as the first of its kind on the history of the Jewish community in Iraq.

21/ At some point the Jewish community's loyalty shifted to the Turks---perhaps only after the Turks were finally victorious---for local Purims in Iraq commemorate the conquest of Baghdad by Turkey in 1638 and again in 1733, when the Persians had taken the city again and were routed by an army sent by Sultan Mahmud. (A more recently instituted local Purim marks the entry into Baghdad of the British armies in 1917.)

> for twenty shekels on the Tigris. Passing on the river I saw the grave of Ezra the Scribe and that of Ezekiel b. Buzi. After another forty days' journey I arrived in Baghdad where all my trouble and sorrow ceased. I hired temporary lodgings with board. This happened on a Friday. I went to the bath to refresh myself. Then I went to the Great Synagogue, where I offered my prayers and read out of the Book of the Lord. I vowed twenty gerah for oil for the perpetual lamp; then I went with the community to fulfil the duty of visiting the sick."[22]

Many European Jews did in fact leave Europe to find new homes and live in the Ottoman Empire. The Turks, having need of the skills and resources of the newcomers, found them useful guests, and some Ashkenazic Jews were prominent in the role of advisers and counsellors to the Sultan. At the same time, it should be remembered that Iraq was a remote province of the Empire, and local pashas ("slave Pashas", largely independent though formally owing allegiance to the Sultan) were undoubtedly willing and even axious to increase their fortunes at the expense of the Iraqi Jews. In 1743, a traveller to Iraq reported that the Pasha had imposed heavy taxes on the Jews of Baghdad and ordered a Jewish banker put to death for failure to pay a sufficient amount. The Jewish community was compelled to ransom the banker's life with 200 bags of gold.[23]

In 1824 there were 1,500 Jewish families in Baghdad, in whose hands the entire commercial life of the city was concentrated. Direct Ottoman rule came to Iraq in 1831, when the last "slave pasha" was deposed by Ali Riza Pasha. The city was besieged for many months. "Plague, flood, famine and siege combined to decimate the population of the city and drive almost the whole Jewish community into exile and despair."[24] The heads of the Jewish community during this period (known as the Nessim) sometimes paid with their lives for their political activities.

22/ Sassoon, who quotes this material (p. 101) calls particular attention to the practise of visiting the sick after divine worship, clearly one of the customs of Iraqi Jewry at that time. The graves of Ezekiel and Ezra at Kifil and in el-Ozeir are still honored by the Jews of Iraq.

23/ Ghanima, p. 137

24/ Sassoon, p. 126

The Modern Period---Emergence of the Independent State of Iraq

After the first World War, when Iraq passed under British mandate, the Jews were prosperous and active in the Mandatory Administration and in the various professions. But, with the emergence of the independent state of Iraq, the liberal tendency which had long prevailed was replaced by an aggressive nationalism which was often manifested in the persecution of various minority groups including the Jews.

At the time Iraq became independent in 1932, its Jewish community numbered well over 110,000. A General Council administered the four main Jewish communities (Baghdad, Mosul, Basra and Kirkuk), imposing taxes and allocating funds for communal activities. Religious courts were operated by a religious council made up of seven rabbis under the chairmanship of the Chief Rabbi. Jews were represented in the Houses of Parliament and there were numerous Jews in the civil service. Jews were manufacturers, merchants, financiers, professional men, officials, agents, craftsmen and domestic servants. The Kurdish Jews, who lived in the North, were small traders and craftsmen and were also engaged in agriculture. Schools sponsored by the Jewish community were considered among the best in the country. In 1932 about 26 synagogues conducted services in Baghdad alone. The most important, the Great Synagogue, Slat li-Kbiri was located, according to tradition, on the spot which the last king of Judah, Jehoiachin, erected a small sanctuary with material carried with him from the Holy Land.[25/]

25/ We are indebted to the World Jewish Congress for much of the following material.

However, as early as 1935, Jews had difficulties in entering the civil service and a number of Jewish civil servants were dismissed. An unwritten numerus clausus in governmental educational institutions was introduced. Jewish schools were placed under governmental supervision and the teaching of Hebrew, except for purely religious instruction, was prohibited. With the arrival of the former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem with his followers in 1936, anti-Jewish propaganda was intensified.

The hostility toward the Jews, fanned by traditional religious hatred and the alleged "economic power" of the Jewish population, manifested itself most violently in the 1941 pogroms in Baghdad and other cities during the last days of the pro-Axis government of Rashid Ali Gailani.

After a period of calm due to the British occupation, discrimination and persecution grew stronger. In 1946, new riots broke out and hundreds of Jews were wounded. In 1947, Jews were accused of having poisoned drinking water. With the creation of the State of Israel, the Iraqi Government arrested Jews and extorted money as a condition for release. In 1951, it was estimated that by fines, blackmail, bribes and difficulties created for the Jewish banks, Iraq had succeeded in extorting approximately 55 million pounds. Jewish civil servants were dismissed, and public schools closed their doors to Jews.

Legal emigration was authorized in March of 1950, but even prior to that time 15,000 Jews had already left the country. They fled secretly, mostly through Iran, and despite official prohibition and heavy penalties if apprehended. The 1950 Law legalizing immigration was limited to a period of one year. In January, 1951, bombs exploded

in the Jewish quarter of Baghdad. At about this same time complicated legislation was enacted which had the effect of depriving most Jews of Iraqi citizenship.

By the end of March, 1951, a wave of terror and lawlessness swept Iraq further jeopardizing the position of the 65,000 Jews still left in the country. Deprived of their assets and virtually barred from employment, many Jews were completely destitute. Police, armed with revolvers and truncheons, often joined by bands of professional criminals, roamed the streets of the main Jewish centers, waylaying Jews and robbing them of whatever meager possessions they still had. The situation became so precarious that the Government finally published a warning against attacks upon Jews and ironically requested those assaulted and beaten to report to the police, taking no notice of the fact that the police themselves were often responsible for these assaults. After this decree, however, the number of attacks upon Jews somewhat subsided.

In a mass evacuation that later became popularly known as "Ali-Baba", between 1948 and 1951, nearly 110,000 Jews left Iraq for Israel; by 1955 total departures reached 126,000.

On March 22, 1951, the Iraqi Government assured those Jews who had managed to retain citizenship that henceforth they would be treated on an equal footing with all other citizens and would be granted all rights guaranteed by the Iraqi Constitution. Despite this assurance, however, the assets even of those Jews of Iraq who had not registered for emigration remained frozen for a considerable period further impoverishing the Jewish community. When the blocking of the property finally was lifted, Jews were permitted to reopen their businesses, but

all remaining Jews in Iraq were required to swear that they were not in possession of goods or articles formerly belonging to Jewish emigrants. Permission for Jews to travel abroad was made conditional upon a showing that such travel was indispensable for medical treatment, business or study. No new import licenses were granted to Jews.

In the following years arrests of Jews on various grounds took place from time to time, usually on charges of storing ammunition in synagogues or participating in alleged Communist and Zionist activities. Jews who fled were denaturalized and Jews who completed their prison sentences were expelled from the country.

Under the Nassim regime (1959) the four or five thousand Jews who remained in Iraq were accorded full equality with other citizens. But the position of Iraqi Jewry began to deteriorate again when the Baathists came into power in 1963.

In March, 1964 the Minister of the Interior instructed the Passport Office to cease issuing passports for Jews. Passports were given only to persons requiring special medical treatment which could not be obtained in Iraq. It took from four to five months to obtain a passport, and the delay often was fatal.

In mid-1963 the Government gave notice to all Iraqi Jews, both in Iraq and outside, to re-register with the authorities within one month, and to prove Iraq citizenship. At that time a number of Jews with Iraqi passports were overseas, and they were required to return within four months, failing which they would lose their nationality. The majority of them did not return and, as in 1950 and 1951, their property and estates were confiscated. It is estimated that following the implementa-

tion of this Law about 3,300 Jews, in and outside Iraq, retained Iraqi nationality.

In 1968 there were about 2,500 Jews left in Iraq, the majority of them in Baghdad. (About 100 lived in Basra.) From 1964 on, Jews have been forbidden to apply for import licenses or to hold Government positions or directorships in public companies. As a result of a 1968 government decree almost no Jews have been permitted to hold salaried positions. During the past few years Jewish youth of school-age have attended a Jewish primary and secondary school in Baghdad, which has about 400 to 500 pupils. Upon graduation from this school they have found it virtually impossible to gain entry into any institution of higher education. A few have been accepted at a special college, financed by the Jewish community and by fees paid by the pupils.[26/]

Five synagogues have continued to operate in Baghdad, the majority only for the Jewish Holy Days and, rarely, on Saturdays. The Community is led by Chief Rabbi Sasson Khadouri. As a kind of superficial concession, kosher meat has remained available. For some years Jews have avoided direct contact from abroad as the receipt of mail may be seriously compromising. There is continuing strict military censorship on all mail from Iraq.

26/ It is interesting to note that the Christian community of Iraq (as well as Egypt, Syria and Jordan) has also been subject to considerable pressure from the government. Christians can no longer hold an important government post or police job, and, although Christians are still admitted to the University, a numerous clausus has been imposed. Most of the employees in the remaining Jewish offices in Iraq are either Jews or Christians, a striking illustration of the fact that the position of Christians and Jews in that country are often linked together.

The Jews of Iraq suffered extensively following the Six-Day War. It is estimated that immediately following the outbreak of hostilities about 90 prominent merchants and property owners were incarcerated. After the war a few were released but most continued to be held long after the fighting ended. During this same period the home and office telephones of Iraqi Jews were disconnected and existing import licenses held by Jews were cancelled. For a period of two to three weeks immediately following the war, most Jewish merchants refrained from going to their offices or businesses. Jews were forced to contribute large sums for Arab refugees and other Arab causes. The long existing ban on external travel which had been invoked against Iraqi Jews was now supplemented by a vigorously enforced ban on internal travel. Since June, 1967, the physical movement of Iraqi Jews has in almost all cases been limited to within their cities of residence. In many cases Jews have been subject to virtual house arrest and restricted to the immediate premises in which they dwell.

An indication of the great pressure to which the Jewish community has been subjected is given in the following statement on the June war by Rabbi Sasson Khadouri, head of the Iraqi Jewish community. Radio Baghdad quoted the Rabbi as condemning "the treacherous Zionist aggression and the use of napalm against Arab countries in the recent war. In my capacity as head of the Jewish community in Iraq, I proclaim with sincerity that I and members of my community are Arabs first and foremost, and we abhor the shedding of Arab blood."

On the 28th of June 1967 new legislation was adopted making it even more difficult for Jews of Iraq to subsist economically. Law No. 64 of 1967 contains the following provisions:

Article 1, Paragraph 6---When this Law comes into force, the Land Registration Departments shall abstain from carrying out any transaction of sale, transfer, donation or mortgage of immovable properties belonging to a Jew, or making a lien on such properties as a security against a debt, bequest, or causing an attachment or obligation thereto as well as any other disposition which would result in such properties being transferred from the Jew's ownership even if such transaction is based on an irrevocable power of attorney with a fixed date, which was granted before this Law comes into effect, or based on any other legal document. The Minister of the Interior may permit the transaction to be carried out if he is convinced that it is not fictitious.

7. After this Law comes into force, it is prohibited (for any person) to sell, mortgage, endorse or transfer the ownership of the shares belonging to a Jew in civil and commercial companies and also the nominal bonds of the State, unless satisfied of the transaction's authenticity.

This law was supplemented thereafter by Law No. 10 of 1968, adopted on February 14, 1968 containing the following provisions:

Article I---Paragraph (6) of Law No. 12 of 1951 as amended shall be cancelled and substituted by the following:

6. When this Law comes into force the Land Registration Departments, Waqf authorities and Notaries Public shall abstain from carrying out any transaction of sale of immovable properties belonging to a Jew, and abstain from carrying out on such properties any transaction which involves the transfer, donation, mortgage, liquidation of joint ownership, selling by execution, making a lien as a security against a debt, bequest, rental for more than one year, causing an attachment or obligation. Also abstain from making any disposition or transaction which would result in such properties being transferred from the Jew's ownership even if the transaction is based on an irrevocable power of attorney with a fixed date which was granted before this Law comes into effect, or based on any other legal documents. The Minister of the Interior may permit the transaction to be carried out if he is satisfied that it is not fictitious.

Article II---The following paragraph shall be added to Article VII of the above Law and shall form paragraph (8) thereof:

8. (a) If the Minister of the Interior issues the necessary permit in accordance with any of paragraphs 5, 6 and 7 of this Article, he may decide that the amounts due to the Jew be deposited in one of the banks. Each time, these amounts shall not be disbursed without the approval of the Minister or anyone who is authorized by him.

(b) The provisions of paragraph (a) above shall apply to all the other transactions and dispositions which would result in sums being payable to a Jew as a consideration, excluding salaries and wages which do not exceed 100 Iraqi dinars per month. The official and semi-official departments, companies and establishments should not pay the amounts due to any Jew in respect of such transactions or dispositions, but inform the Minister of the Interior thereof.

The net effect of existing Iraqi legislation is to cut off Jews from almost every conceivable source of income. The new provisions make it impossible for Jews to sell, lease or mortgage property without special permission from the Minister of Interior. They require all business to stop paying sums owed to Jews and instead to notify the Minister of the indebtedness. Under the new law, Jews may only be paid salaries up to $280 (100 dinars) a month, which is insufficient to sustain a family. These measures are only a few steps short of those required totally to appropriate the property of the Jewish community.

Reports from within Iraq indicate that the situation has deteriorated further within the last few months. It is indicated that as of the end of February with the exception of a few teachers and businessmen, and one professor whose services apparently are greatly needed by the government, almost no Jews can find employment

anywhere. Poverty and want, even among those Jews formerly thought to be persons of means, is increasing and is quickly reaching a point of desperation. Moreover, limitations upon personal activities are increasingly severe and even personal effects can no longer be sold.

Late January these acts of economic persecution were augmented by the even more horrifying and brutal attacks upon the physical person of Iraqi Jews. On January 27, 14 persons were executed and their bodies publicly displayed amid great hysteria, rejoicing and a sense of general carnival in the main squares of Baghdad and Basra. Nine of those hanged were Jews, two were Christians and three were Moslems. The so-called conspiracy allegedly was headed by an illiterate Jewish shopkeeper in Basra who is charged with directing a complicated and elaborate espionage scheme in concert with high leaders of a deposed Iraqi regime. This unlikely spy-master allegedly engaged in these delicate and difficult subversive machinations despite the fact that like all other Jews in Iraq, he has been subject to close police scrutiny ever since the Six-Day War.

These executions followed sentences imposed by proceedings described by the Iraqi Government as "military trials." In fact, these were summary hearings conducted in secret and without opportunity for anything even approaching a genuine defense. Statements of government spokesmen confidently predicting the outcome made it clear that the sentences were unquestionably determined in advance. To describe these procedures as trials is to empty that term of meaning.

Virtually for the first time since the Hitler period the entire non-Arab world responded to this persecution and murder of Jews

with an outcry of revulsion and denunciation. The authoritative Vatican newspaper "L'Osservatore Romano," revealed that Pope Paul VI had interceded through an emissary in Baghdad before the sentences were announced. The Vatican paper said that "it is our right and duty to affirm that such events introduce a new and profound breach in a situation already exacerbated by hatred." Prominent Protestant churchmen in all parts of the world similarly condemned the hangings. In this country the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, led a protest vigil in Detroit. The Nassau Council of Churches in an action illustrative of that undertaken by many local church bodies throughout the country urged the U. S. "to use its good offices to press the Iraqi Government to permit its Jewish population to emigrate."

Public protest demonstrations were held in many world capitals. In New York City, an estimated 20,000 people picketed the Iraqi Mission to the United Nations. The Philadelphia City Council adopted a resolution "condemning the Government of Iraq for its barbarous treatment of the Jewish people in that country."

In addition, various national governments sought to intercede. The French Ambassador in Baghdad twice called on the Iraqi Foreign Minister in an attempt to dissuade the Iraqi regime from carrying out the death sentences. President de Gaulle was reported privately to have expressed his profound distress and and disappointment over the Iraqi action. The Canadian Government announced its readiness to grant sanctuary to all Jews who manage to emigrate from Iraq. Foreign Minister Joseph Luns of the Netherlands announced that immigration visas to

Holland would be issued to Iraqi Jews upon request. Australian Prime Minister Gorton condemned the outrages. In Stockholm the Council of Nordic Ministers, representing Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden denounced the executions. Guatemalan Foreign Minister Arenales (currently President of the United Nations General Assembly) dispatched an appeal to the Iraqi Government.

Similarly, a broad span of inter-governmental and international voluntary organizations expressed their shock and horror over the executions. These included the Council of Europe, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the World Confederation of Labor and Amnesty International. The press of the world united in almost universal condemnation of the hangings.

Nonetheless, in defiance of this worldwide outpouring of protest, the Iraqi Government on February 19th proceeded to execute an additional seven Iraqis on trumped-up charges of espionage and again publicly displayed the bodies in the principal square in Baghdad. This time no Jews were included among their number. As stated by Rabbi Arthur J. Lelyveld, President of the American Jewish Congress: "It does not lessen our outrage at these brutalities that no Jews were included among the latest victims. Whether the victims are Jews, Moslems or Christians, our concern is with the absence of even minimal justice in the secret military trials that condemned them and the debased treatment of their remains. The repetition by Iraq of its barbaric display of human corpses pollutes the moral atmosphere everywhere. It is unthinkable that at this stage of human civilization there would still be countries in which dead bodies are considered an

acceptable focus of public spectacle. This is not merely morally corrupt; it is pathological. The appalling effort by Iraqi authorities to make these executions the occasion for public celebration demonstrates the hopeless degeneracy of the military clique that now governs in Iraq. Their actions degrade all mankind."

Conclusion

The long history of the Jewish community in Iraq is ineluctably nearing its end. The world waits in horror for possible resumption of the recent executions. The only realistic hope for the surviving Jewish remnant in that country is immediate emigration. If the government of Iraq does not want its Jewish community there are other nations of the world who do. If the government of Iraq finds it necessary to treat them with cruelty and abuse there are others who would cherish them and receive them with fraternal affection.

Although Iraqi spokesmen have proclaimed that Jews in that country are free to leave whenever they wish, the facts appear to be otherwise. As we have already noted, for many years Iraqi Jews except under the most extraordinary circumstances have been denied exit visas. In recent weeks the Jewish communities of the world have publicly pledged themselves and their resources to make any necessary arrangements for the reception of Iraqi Jews in other places. They stand ready to undertake whatever steps are required to satisfy the Iraqi government of the sincerity of their purpose. Jews throughout the world have repeatedly affirmed to the present regime in Iraq: We want nothing else from your government. We ask only for the lives of our brothers.

We await the release of the last 2500 Jews in Iraq. When it comes, it will inevitably mark a moment of commingled relief and sadness. Relief over the rescue and salvage of human life. Sadness over the termination of the long, sometimes brilliant, sometimes anguished, sojourn in Babylon.

Phil Baum
Carol Weisbrod

March, 1969

APPENDIX

The Pact of Omar (circa 9th century)

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate!

This is a writing to Omar from the Christians of such and such a city. When you [Moslems] marched against us [Christians], we asked of you protection for ourselves, our posterity, our possessions, and our co-religionists; and we made this stipulation with you, that we will not erect in our city or the suburbs any new monastery, church, cell or hermitage; that we will not repair any of such buildings that may fall into ruins, or renew those that may be situated in the Moslem quarters of the town; that we will not refuse the Moslems entry into our churches either by night or by day; that we will open the gates wide to passengers and travellers; that we will receive any Moslem traveller into our houses and give him food and lodging for three nights; that we will not harbor any spy in our churches or houses, or conceal any enemy of the Moslems. [At least six of these laws were taken over from earlier Christian laws against infidels.]

That we will not teach our children the Koran [some nationalist Arabs feared the infidels would ridicule the Koran; others did not want infidels even to learn the language]; that we will not make a show of the Christian religion nor invite any one to embrace it; that we will not prevent any of our kinsmen from embracing Islam, if they so desire. That we will honor the Moslems and rise up in our assemblies when they wish to take their seats; that we will not imitate them in our dress, either in the cap, turban, sandals, or parting of the hair; that we will not make use of their expressions of speech, nor adopt their surnames [infidels must not use greetings and special phrases employed only by Moslems]; that we will not ride on saddles, or gird on swords, or take to ourselves arms or wear them, or engrave Arabic inscriptions on our rings; that we will not sell wine [forbidden to Moslems]; that we will shave the front of our heads; that we will keep to our own style of dress, wherever we may be; that we will wear girdles around our waists [infidels wore leather or cord girdles; Moslems, cloth and silk].

That we will not display the cross upon our churches or display our crosses or our sacred books in the streets of the Moslems, or in their market-places; that we will strike the clappers in our churches lightly [wooden rattles or bells summoned the people to church or synagogue]; that we will not recite our services in a loud voice when a Moslem is present; that we will not carry palm-branches [on Palm Sunday] or our images in procession in the streets; that at the burial of our dead we will not chant loudly or carry lighted candles in the streets of the Moslems or their marketplaces; that we will not take any slaves that have already been in the possession of Moslems, nor spy into their houses; and that we will not strike any Moslem.

All this we promise to observe, on behalf of ourselves and our co-religionists, and receive protection from you in exchange; and if we violate any of the conditions of this agreement, then we forfeit your protection and you are at liberty to treat us as enemies and rebels."