

## Imagined Homelands: Baghdadi Jews in South, East and Southeast Asia, and Europe (1850-1950)

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### Abstract

*Adopting a transnational perspective, this article investigates the history, mobility and identity of Baghdadi Jews in South, East and Southeast Asia and in Europe between 1850 and 1950. Unlike previous works on the subject, which have focused mainly on the magnates among the Baghdadis of the Asian hubs, this article also includes many references to the middle classes. The first part of the article examines how Baghdadis in the Asian hubs transformed their collective identity by dwelling in and across India, Singapore, Burma (Myanmar) and China and what role did mobility play in this process. Individuals travelled for reasons and work or leisure, they exchanged money and commodities, used different languages (among them Judeo-Arabic and English), and objects circulated too; among them liturgical and religious objects, as well as the Jewish press. The second part analyzes what was the significance of Europe for this group. London represented a point of arrival for many of the most successful traders among them, especially the tycoons. However, in the first half of the twentieth century other capitals (Paris, Madrid, and even New York) acquired a growing relevance in connection to the contemporary contraction of the Sephardic space and expansion of the Ashkenazi one. Sources for this work come from oral history repositories at the National Archives of Singapore, the Hong Kong Oral History Project, the memorial website Jewish Calcutta and from the contemporary Jewish press, and in particular the Shanghai based monthly publication Israel's Messenger.*

### Introduction

#### Baghdad

*Mobility: Individuals*

*Mobility: Philanthropy*

*Mobility: Rituals and Ritual Objects (Prayer Books)*

*Mobility: A New Leadership for a Transnational Community outside Iraq*

*Mobility: Languages and Travel*

## Europe

*The “Rothschilds of the East”?*  
*Baghdadis Staying. A Few Examples from India*  
*Oriental/Eastern/Sephardi Jewry*  
*Spain/Sefarad*

## Conclusions

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## Introduction

The history of Baghdadi Jews in South, East and Southeast Asia is often associated with the names of the Sassoons, the Kadoories, the Ezras and (usually) their (male) descendants, as well as those of several other wealthy families, like that of Silas A. Hardoon. The historical trajectory of these families, how they accumulated fantastic wealth and built economic empires while trading in Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon, Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai in the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, and their ultimate acceptance into British elites in London, has usually been told from a top-down perspective as a single trajectory of an elite that from the Middle East headed eastwards, following the expanding commercial routes of the British Empire. This history has inevitably lent itself to sensationalism: after all, the wealthiest among the Baghdadis contributed to the development of the main capitals of South, East and Southeast Asia from the point of view of finance, economy and even architecture,<sup>1</sup> factors that recently even earned them the title of “last kings of Shanghai.”<sup>2</sup> The methods of economic history, family history, network analysis and a top-down perspective have therefore intertwined to create a single narrative that celebrates Baghdadi Jews as an incredibly successful

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Berliner, *Shanghai’s Jews: Art, Architecture and Survival*, Contemporary Jewish Museum of San Francisco. Accessed May 19, 2022, [https://thecjm.org/learn\\_resources/301](https://thecjm.org/learn_resources/301). See also, Stephanie Po-yin Chung, “Floating in Mud to Reach the Skies: Victor Sassoon and the Real Estate Boom in Shanghai, 1920s–1930s,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 16 (2019): 1–31.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Kaufman, *The Last Kings of Shanghai: The Rival Jewish Dynasties that Helped Create Modern China* (New York: Viking, 2020).

commercial and financial elite.<sup>3</sup> This has caused a partially distorted representation, as if they were all magnates and all aspired to leave the Middle East and become (or be acknowledged as) Europeans. With few exceptions, this elite has been taken as representing the whole group, though its composition was far more varied: most Baghdadis doing business in Asia were indeed merchants, but some were not, and very few of the approximately 10,000 of them who lived between Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai and then London ever came close to owning as many assets and estates as the Sassoons, the Kadoories, the Ezras or Silas Hardoon.<sup>4</sup> Some indeed transferred their business and lives to London and Europe, but many remained in Asia, in India for instance, well after 1950.

In part, such a distortion is inevitable and has been caused by a combination of various factors. First, the greater availability of sources: these extended families often operated as large family firms and have left plenty of commercial and personal correspondences as well as photographic archives. Furthermore, given the personal and/or professional relationships of many of them with British institutions and even some royals, their names are often found in official records from the British governments and the Foreign Office. The press (both the general and the Jewish one, including those periodical publications which defended their economic interests) wrote often about them. Administrative sources are also available from the numerous charitable institutions that these families funded across the Middle East, South, East and Southeast Asia. Second, the elites among the Baghdadis were pictured and discussed publicly more often than the middle classes because of the striking impression that their rapid upward social mobility made, accompanied as it was by their determination to be included as equals among the (British and European) Jewish and non-Jewish economic and social elites. Finally, it is difficult to resist the glamour that accompanied most of their social undertakings. The professional and social standing of different generations of Sassoons illustrates clearly the intertwining of these elements: in 1873 the first son of David Sassoon, Abdallah (Albert), as the new head of the David Sassoon & Co. after his father's death in 1864, was the first Jew ever to be given the "Freedom of the City" of London award, in recognition of extraordinary success or celebrity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Yuk Chui Kong, "Jewish Merchants' Community in Shanghai: A Study of the Kadoorie Enterprise, 1890-1950" (PhD diss., Hong Kong Baptist University, 2017). See also Joseph Sassoon, *The Sassoons: The Great Global Merchants and the Making of an Empire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> These are the estimates of Sasha R. Goldstein-Sabbah, *Baghdadi Jewish Networks in Hashemite Iraq: Jewish Transnationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 225.

<sup>5</sup> Sassoon, *The Sassoons*, 114.

At the end of the century, the Sassoons were well-known as fabulous hosts in the merry-go-round of parties and receptions held by British aristocracy in London, Bombay, Rangoon and Shanghai. In the 1930s, a few generations later, Victor Sassoon hosted sumptuous balls in his Cathay hotel in Shanghai, the highest skyscraper in Asia (1929). These were attended by famed celebrities, as the numerous photographs of him with Vivian Leigh, Marlene Dietrich and Charlie Chaplin show.

In the last two decades, scholarship has begun to address the history of Baghdadi Jews in Asia from different geographical and methodological perspectives. From the vantage point of India, Baghdadis have been conceptualized as “super-diverse” for their varied Middle Eastern origin and composition.<sup>6</sup> Some of them have had their life stories told through the lenses of family history and a gender perspective has also entered the picture.<sup>7</sup> Seen from Burma (Myanmar), Baghdadis have been framed as a “connected Diaspora” because of the identity networks to which they participated.<sup>8</sup> Taking into consideration their main point of origin, Baghdad and Iraq, they have been recently analyzed as “satellite communities” and Goldstein-Sabbah has demonstrated the mutual cultural, political and economic influences that shaped these communities.<sup>9</sup> In general, regardless of their location, Baghdadi Jews living in Asian countries have been seen as “almost Englishmen” and/or “imagined Britons,” a group that aspired to be accepted as equals by the ruling class in the British colonial world, and that Elizabeth E. Imber aptly termed a “late imperial elite.”<sup>10</sup>

The economic and social parable of the Jewish Baghdadi elites in South, East, Southeast Asia and Europe is certainly very important in itself. It is also crucial to understand the history of non-elite Baghdadis who followed them to Asia, but more rarely to Europe. Many Baghdadis who were engaged in trade in the Asian hubs were employed by the Sassoons in one of the branches of their family firm and some of them later turned into tycoons themselves, like Eliezer (Ellis)

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<sup>6</sup> Shalva Weil, ed., *The Baghdadi Jews in India: Maintaining Communities, Negotiating Identities and Creating Super-Diversity* (Abingdon-New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Jael Silliman, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope* (London-New York-Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2022, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 2001); Sassoon, *The Sassoons, 170-192*.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Fredman Cernea, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Goldstein-Sabbah, *Baghdadi Jewish Networks*.

<sup>10</sup> Chiara Betta, “From Orientals to Imagined Britons: Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai,” *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 4 (2003): 999-1023; Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Protected Persons? The Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora, the British State, and the Persistence of Empire,” *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 1 (2011): 80-108; Elizabeth E. Imber, “A Late Imperial Elite Baghdadi Jews in British India and the Political Horizons of Empire and Nation,” *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no. 2 (2018): 48-85.

Kedoorie and Silas A. Haroon. However, as Jael Silliman and Maisie J. Meyer have shown, others owned and managed small businesses and were not dependent on the commercial enterprises of the British or elite Jews.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this was a socially diversified group that included also middle-class Jews, as well as Jews that “were all struggling, living hand to mouth, buying something and selling something and trying to make a living,”<sup>12</sup> as Jacob Ballas from Singapore recalled. These groups, and not only the elites, deserve visibility.

In this study, that includes middle classes as well as tycoons, I use an approach of entangled and transnational history<sup>13</sup> and, therefore, I look at the mobility and circulation of capital, people, goods, ideas, information, news and their influence in shaping the collective path of Baghdadi Jews through South, East and Southeast Asia, as well as collective memories and self-representation. The primary sources for this study are photographic and oral, and I have integrated them with articles from the Jewish press of Shanghai. The first two come from various repositories of oral history interviews: the oral history project at the National Archives of Singapore, the Hong Kong Heritage Project (HKHP)<sup>14</sup> and the memorial website *Recalling Jewish Calcutta*, which would deserve an analysis of its own.<sup>15</sup> All these archives make us hear the voices (and see the faces) of Baghdadi Jews from all walks of life outside of Iraq, in their dwellings at work, at school, in their dealings with either the magnates on the one hand or local Jews on the other (for example in India), while traveling, studying, working, on holiday or at home with their families. The other main source that I use in this research is the newspaper *Israel's Messenger*. Carrying the subtitle “fortnightly journal for the Jewish home” (later a monthly), the *Israel's Messenger* was established in Shanghai in 1904 by Nissim

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<sup>11</sup> Silliman, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames*, 33; Maisie J. Meyer, *Shanghai's Baghdadi Jews: A Collection of Biographical Reflections* (Hong Kong: Blacksmith Books, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> See the oral history collection of the National Archives of Singapore (henceforth NAS), Communities of Singapore (part 1), Accession Number 000163, *Interview to Jacob Ballas*, December 6, 1983, Transcript Reel/Disc 2, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Tansen Sen, *India, China and the World: A Connected History* (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Fiona Paisly and Pamela Scully, *Writing Transnational History* (London-New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> “Oral History Interviews Collection,” The Hong Kong Heritage Project, accessed December 28, 2022, <https://www.hongkongheritage.org/pages/oral-history>. Founded by Sir Michael Kadoorie in 2007 to preserve the history and promote the heritage of Hong Kong (and not just Jews in Hong Kong).

<sup>15</sup> At the time of writing (early December 2022) a new version of the website *Recalling Jewish Calcutta* is online at [www.jewishcalcutta.in](http://www.jewishcalcutta.in) though many of the web-pages that populated its older version do not appear online (yet?). For this reason, I refer here to some of the material from the older version that was saved on the website Internet Archive, Wayback Machine at [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org).

Elias Benjamin (N.E.B.) Ezra and published until 1941 as the mouthpiece of the Shanghai Zionist Association, founded in 1904. Despite its explicit political and national orientation, the *Israel's Messenger*, was not concerned with Zionism alone; in 1904 there was little to report anyway, at least from Palestine. On the contrary, the journal dealt with numerous subjects and questions of Jewish and broader interest that reveal the cultural, political and economic transnational web in which the Baghdadis of all social extractions moved and interacted.

I have divided this article in two main parts: first, I examine the uninterrupted flow of communication and the continuous connection between Baghdadis of various social backgrounds in South, East and Southeast Asia and their point of origin, Baghdad and Iraq until the mid-1930s. In this context, Baghdad, more than Jerusalem, often represented the Homeland, while the elites had already identified London as the promised land, or rather as the capital of that transnational financial, economic and cultural space in which they had been moving since the mid-nineteenth century. Second, I focus on the period that followed, after 1931, when Baghdad could realistically no longer be used as a practical or an ideal reference point and the Baghdadi Jewish (and by extension the Sephardi) identity entered a period of decline. Beyond London, during the 1930s another European country—Spain—entered into this multi-layered and complex Baghdadi identity: in this context, nostalgic visions of an idealized past in medieval Spain became the foundation of a narrative that moved the point of origin of this group back in time and helped imagine another possible homeland in yet another European context.

## Baghdad

As it is well known, between the early nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries Jewish communities in Iraq saw a constant growth in numbers: in the early nineteenth century there were about 10,000 Jews in Baghdad and less than 1,500 in Basra; by 1908, Jews amounted to 53,000 of Baghdad's 150,000 inhabitants; the last Ottoman yearbook for Baghdad of 1917 indicated that the number of Jews had risen to 80,000 out of 202,200 residents. According to the national census of 1947 there were 118,000 Jews out of a population of 4,5 million (2,6 percent). Jews were largely concentrated in the largest cities with 77,500 in Baghdad, 10,500 in Basra, and 10,300 in Mosul.<sup>16</sup> Such a growth should be understood in the framework of

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<sup>16</sup> These data are taken from Nissim Rejwan, *The Last Jews in Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), xi-xii.

a growing tension between the administrative reforms of the Ottoman empire and the progressive secularization of the Jewish community of Iraq, which in turn set in motion various other processes: a professional diversification of the Jewish population, the political and national engagement of active groups of intellectuals and a general enhanced prosperity of the community itself, despite the persistence of pockets of poverty also among Jews. If the 1920s were somewhat of a golden age for this community, they also represented the starting point of increasing discrimination, antisemitism and persecution that culminated in the *Farhud* of 1941 and in the successive tragic exodus of large part of the Jewish community of Iraq between 1949 and 1951.<sup>17</sup>

These numbers provide some context to the volume and nature of the political, economic, social, cultural and linguistic interactions between Baghdadis in Iraq and those in the Asian hubs; indirectly, they also indicate that these exchanges occurred in a transnational perspective and that they were not conducted only by the magnates among the Baghdadis in South, East and Southeast Asia, but also by the middle classes, both in Iraq and abroad.<sup>18</sup>

In the following pages, I give several examples of such mobility and circulation, considering some of the tangible and intangible elements that kept the connection flowing. These included individuals who moved between places for professional or recreational reasons, capital that flowed for business, donations and endowments, objects that circulated widely, like secular or religious books and newspapers. Mobility transmitted ideas, replicated and amplified languages, transformed religious rituals, and conveyed a shared identity and a collective heritage. In time, across the generations, it also changed this group, as those who had been born and brought up in the Baghdadi hubs in South, East and Southeast Asia, often remained there or later migrated to Australia or the US, and Israel to a much lesser extent.

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<sup>17</sup> See for example Nissim Kazzaz, *The Jews in Iraq in the Twentieth Century* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1991) [Hebrew]; Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, *Zionism in an Arab Country: Jews in Iraq in 1940* (London-New York: Routledge, 2004); Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of the Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Aline Schlaepfer, *Les intellectuels juifs de Bagdad: Discours et Allegiances 1908–1951* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Orit Bashkin, *Impossible Exodus: Iraqi Jews in Israel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); Jonathan Sciarcon, *Educational Oases in the Desert: The Alliance Israélite Universelle's Girl's Schools in Ottoman Iraq, 1895–1915* (Albany: Suny, 2017). See also the documentary by Fiona Murphy, *Remember Baghdad*, 2017, available with Arabic subtitles on YouTube, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHBoM9f3bMc>, accessed December 18, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Goldstein-Sabbah, *Baghdadi Jewish Networks*.

### *Mobility: Individuals*

The journeys that Baghdadi Jews continued to undertake throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century to Baghdad and Basra for family or business reasons had an important effect on the community, its composition, and on the mobility of its members. David Sassoon sent Sassoon David (1832-1867), one his sons, to study in Baghdad; others “would be sent to Baghdad to encourage young men and their families to pastures new.”<sup>19</sup> Hiring employees from families that the Sassoons knew was a way to build trust, and enabled the company to continue its correspondence in Judeo-Arabic, a language that was indecipherable to outsiders and that, therefore, gave them an edge in business. In Shanghai, “the China Directory for 1874 record[ed] the names of 20 employees in the two Sassoon firms.”<sup>20</sup> In Singapore, Samuel Bernard Sassoon’s grandfather—whose family was originally from Basra—had been an employee of Singapore’s Baghdadi tycoon Menasseh Meyer, while his father was a small businessman<sup>21</sup>. In Shanghai, others pursued different careers: Eliahu Silman Levy (ca. 1870-1941) was a merchant; David Saul Levy (1898-1939) was a shop owner; David Abraham (1893-1958) was a bookkeeper.<sup>22</sup> Looking at India, and at Calcutta in particular, Jacob Isaac Jonah had come “to Calcutta from Baghdad in 1900, worked in the jute industry for E.D. Sassoon [while] his brother worked in the silk industry in Shanghai.” His son Isaac also “worked for E.D. Sassoon at the age of sixteen” and later married an English woman, whose “father had come to India as an engineer.”<sup>23</sup> The family of Nissim Matook immigrated from Baghdad to India in the early 1800s following the Sassoons; he was born in Shanghai and then moved to Hong Kong.<sup>24</sup> Shlomo Ezra Pinhas Barook Mizrahi was a cook who arrived in Calcutta from Baghdad in 1903 and then turned to the import/export business with offices in Calcutta and

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<sup>19</sup> Sassoon, *The Sassoons*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Meyer, *Shanghai’s Baghdadi Jews*, 68. The two Sassoon firms were “David Sassoon & Co. Ltd.” and “E.D. Sassoon & Co., Ltd.”

<sup>21</sup> NAS, Communities of Singapore (Part 1), Accession Number 004502, *Interview to Samuel Bernard Sassoon*, December 30, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Meyer, *Shanghai’s Baghdadi Jews*. The biographies of the individuals mentioned above are respectively at pages 147-163; 164-177; 178-186; 325-331; 354-364.

<sup>23</sup> “Jonah Family. Rachel Jonah note,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta, accessed December 8, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20190728204051/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/com\\_portraits/jonah\\_com](https://web.archive.org/web/20190728204051/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/com_portraits/jonah_com).

<sup>24</sup> The Hong Kong Heritage Project (henceforth HKHP), Oral History Collection, I373, Nissim Matook.



Rangoon.<sup>25</sup> The grandparents of Charles Simon, who arrived in Singapore from Baghdad via the Dutch Indies, “were in the jute business” and “had the usual kind of business with people who had come here from the Middle East.”<sup>26</sup> Pnina Ashkenazi (née Howard) “worked with the Indian Railway Service and then practiced law at the Guwahati High Court (and) was the first Khasi [sic?] woman advocate.”<sup>27</sup> Such interactions would also take place on holiday, as other testimonies recall:

Members of the Jewish community rented cottages in Mudderpore and Gopalpur and socialized with one another there. They played Backgammon, Poker and Mahjong just as they did in Calcutta, but in a holiday setting.<sup>28</sup>

Oral and photographic sources tell of the high mobility of the members of this community, through different social classes, for reasons of study, work, as well as of their interactions with local Jews, whether on the workplace, in the city or on holiday.

From a different geographical perspective, the *Israel's Messenger* of Shanghai too shows the high mobility of this community; it published the news of the travels of many Baghdadis (and the outcomes of their visits) to the many locations where this newspaper was sold and read, in Shanghai, India, Burma, Singapore, Hong Kong (often referred to as “the Colony”) and London. From 1929, a new subtitle was added to this publication to reflect this new reality “The International Jewish Monthly.”<sup>29</sup> The *Israel's Messenger* represented the interests and the voice of the wealthier among the Baghdadis; thus, the more distinguished the travelers, the more detailed the descriptions of their relations with (and their contributions to) Iraq and its population. The travels and visits of middle-class Baghdadis were also

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<sup>25</sup> “Mizrahi family,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta, accessed December 8, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20190801052013/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/com\\_portraits/mizrahi-family](https://web.archive.org/web/20190801052013/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/com_portraits/mizrahi-family).

<sup>26</sup> NAS, Communities of Singapore (Part 1), Accession Number 000395, *Interview to Charles Simon*, February 18, 1984, Transcript Reel/Disc 1, 2.

<sup>27</sup> “Ashkenazi family,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta, accessed December 8, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20190729234559/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/com\\_portraits/ashkenazy-family](https://web.archive.org/web/20190729234559/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/com_portraits/ashkenazy-family).

<sup>28</sup> “Jonah Family, includes a note on Rechel Levy née Jonah,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta, accessed December 8, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20190728204051/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/com\\_portraits/jonah\\_com](https://web.archive.org/web/20190728204051/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/com_portraits/jonah_com).

<sup>29</sup> *Israel's Messenger* 26, no. 1, “Silver Jubilee Number” (April 5, 1929 - Adar Sheni 25, 5689): 1.

reported, though in less detail, in the journal's section "Social and Personal," which is likely to have been paid for by the individuals concerned. This type of coverage was reserved for those who belonged to the rising professional middle classes, as in the case of "Dr. and Mrs. Aflatoun" whose return to Shanghai from Baghdad was announced on the pages of the *Israel's Messenger*.<sup>30</sup> Here, a brief professional presentation and family lineage gave context for the readers: in this case, Dr. Aflatoun "from a well-known family hailing from Bagdad [sic]" was married to the unnamed (but well-traveled) only daughter of Mr. Sassoon Kajamon from Baghdad, herself a "graduate of the Dutch College at Java." More simply, in July 1925 the *Israel's Messenger* just reported that "Mr. Albert Loya returned to Bagdad [sic] on the *Delta* on the 18<sup>th</sup> instant."<sup>31</sup>

### ***Mobility: Philanthropy***

Money was another element that flowed extensively in these exchanges. When tycoons were involved, currency flowed mainly into Jewish, and sometimes also into some non-Jewish, welfare and educational institutions in Iraq, for example through the endowment of a school or a hospital in Baghdad that would be open to all. This was the case of Mr. and Mrs. David Ezra from Calcutta, who in 1925 had donated "Rs 75,000 to schools, hospitals, orphanages without distinction of race or creed" and who had been very "well received by the Jewish notables of Bagdad [sic] and Basrah."<sup>32</sup> Likewise, "Mr. E[llis] S. Kadoorie, Mr. Laurence Kadoorie and Mr. Horace Kadoorie of Shanghai" had donated "Rs 15,000 to Mohammedan institutions" and had been welcomed at the train station by the notables of the Jewish community of Baghdad, led by the principal of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) school. They then had entertained private conversations with the Prime Minister of Iraq (former, Ja'afar Pasha Al Askari, and current, Yassim Pasha al Hashmi) and with the King himself.<sup>33</sup> The year before the *Israel's Messenger* had praised the Laura Kadoorie School for Girls in

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<sup>30</sup> "Notes from Iraq," *Israel's Messenger* 10, no. 10 [B] (July 31, 1925 - Ab 10 5685): 10. Some issues of the *Israel Messenger* carry the same volume and issue numbers even though published on different dates. Those that follow this different system are here labelled as [B] in order to distinguish them from the issues that follow the overall regular numbering. The first issue that repeats an already assigned number - and should therefore be considered as [B] - is 10, no. 1 (June 6, 1924 - Elul 27, 5684).

<sup>31</sup> "Social and Personal," *Israel's Messenger* 10, no. 10 [B] (July 31, 1925 - Ab 10 5685): 12.

<sup>32</sup> "Notes from Iraq," *Israel's Messenger* 10, no. 9 [B] (June 5, 1925 - Siwan 13, 5685): 6.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Baghdad (as well as the Boys' School, established by Sir Albert Sassoon) as “the best model to their sister institutions throughout Mesopotamia” for “the cleanliness of the pupils, their standard of education, their perseverance and zeal.” Included was also a profile of Eliezer (Ellis) Kedorie taken from the local Arab press, and in particular *Al Iraq*:

A great benefactor and philanthropist who left Baghdad when young and whom the Almighty helped to acquire huge wealth (...), who allotted a big portion of his money to charitable works in his motherland especially in Iraq (...) for the moral upheaval of his co-religionists (...). He also appointed a committee from his [sic] family at Baghdad for the inspection of the Institution he named [sic] after his late wife Laura Kadoorie.<sup>34</sup>

Funds for education and welfare in Iraq were collected not only when tycoons went back to visit but also when Jewish emissaries (usually rabbis) from Iraq traveled to the hubs of the Baghdadi diaspora in South, East and Southeast Asia. In 1908, for example, the Grand Rabbi of Mosul Elia S. Sayigh left on a fund-raising trip that brought him first to India, and then to Shanghai, to collect donations for the construction of a boys' and girls' school in Mosul to be managed by the AIU.<sup>35</sup> On that occasion the *Israel's Messenger* reported that the Baghdadi community in Shanghai had “extended their helping hand to their sister Communities [of Mosul, Basrah and Baghdad] in the time of need”<sup>36</sup> and Rabbi Sayigh collected enough funding to establish a girls' school next to the one for boys. Indeed, education, and its importance in raising the general welfare of the Jewish population in Iraq, was central in these exchanges and travels.

When travel was not possible, the search for funding for the education of the new generations in Iraq took the form of appeals that from Baghdad were directed “to the many co-religionists in China, who formerly had their origin in Iraq.” This was the case of the appeal that Ezekiel H. Haroon, the principal of the Midrash *Talmud Torah* in Baghdad published on the *Israel's Messenger* in 1926, in order to save “the institution from being wrecked and paralyzed,” as at the time it was unable to “give shelter to the thousands of poor and orphan children who

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<sup>34</sup> Geo S. Shina, “The Laura Kadoorie School for Girls at Bagdad [sic],” *Israel's Messenger* 11, no. 7 (April 11, 1924 - Nisan 7, 5684): 24.

<sup>35</sup> “The Jews of Mossoul,” *Israel's Messenger* 5, no. 7 (July 10, 1908 - Tamuz 11, 5668): 1; “The Jews of Mossoul,” *Israel's Messenger* 5, no. 8 (July 24, 1908 - Ab 25, 5668): 4-6.

<sup>36</sup> “The Jews of Mossoul,” *Israel's Messenger* 5, no. 7 (July 10, 1908 - Tamuz 11, 5668): 1.

wish[ed] to receive education within its walls,” and was “consequently [...] obliged to turn them away.”<sup>37</sup>

*Mobility: Rituals and Ritual Objects (Prayer and Religious Books)*

Traveling to Iraq and supporting the education and welfare of local Jews was not the only way to keep a connection and a continuity alive between the points of origin and the Asian hubs; another was maintaining the liturgical style of Baghdad—the *Minhag Edot HaMizrach*—in the synagogues that Baghdadis built in Poona, Bombay, Singapore, Rangoon, Shanghai and Hong Kong between 1856 and 1932. Given that this group imagined and represented itself as an orthodox community with a specific identity, it saw *Sifrei Torah* (Pentateuchs) and prayer books as crucial instruments to maintain and transmit that identity.

At the beginning of the 1920s the question of which prayer book should become the standard for the Baghdadi communities in South, East and Southeast Asia was discussed extensively between D. S. Gubbay, from the Ohel Leah congregation of Hong Kong, and Rabbi W. Hirsch of the Ohel Rachel Synagogue of Shanghai. Competing for selection were three texts: first, the *Book of Prayer and Order of Service according to the customs of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews with and English translation*, which Rabbi Haham Moses Gaster had published in London in 1904 with Oxford University Press; second, the Livorno edition of the *Shabbat and Holiday Prayer* book and, finally, the Baghdad edition of the same volume. All followed a Sephardi tradition, but there were language and liturgical differences between them. Adopting the first would have helped those who attended religious service but who could no longer understand Hebrew, or who did not find it easy to follow the *minhag* from Baghdad (including some Ashkenazi Jews who were also living in Hong Kong), but it implied renouncing some of the Baghdadi distinctiveness. In a long exchange of letters, Rabbi D.S. Gubbay (Hong Kong) described to Rabbi Hirsch (Shanghai) how the discussion around this issue had developed in the community he represented:

Several members opposed the suggestion [of adopting the book by Gaster] on the ground that they were desirous that no prayer book should be used, other than the Livorno edition or the Baghdad edition, since Haham Gaster’s book eliminated the *Pitum Haketoret* in the Sabbath Musaph [sic]. It was further pointed out that several other piyutim [sic]

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<sup>37</sup> “An Appeal from Iraq,” *Israel’s Messenger* 11, no. 11 (August 6, 1926 - Ab 26, 5686): 16.

and prayers were not included in the Books in question. Another opposer argued against the new innovation on the fact that the Livorno and Bagdad [sic] editions are the only ones that are established by the Anshey keneseth Hagedola [sic] and that they are based on the Cabalistical [sic] theory of beri'a w'atziah [sic].<sup>38</sup>

Rabbi Hirsch rectified most of the statements on which the congregation of Hong Kong had based its refusal of Gastner's book, arguing that the Livorno and Baghdad prayer books were not the same, that they could not be traced back all the way to *the Anshei Knesset HaGedolah*, and that their kabalistic references were incorrect. Still, he recommended that "the official service of your synagogue [Hong Kong] should not depart from the Bagdad [sic] Minhag to which it rightly belongs."<sup>39</sup> Even if the two rabbis concluded that the standard prayer book for the communities of the East should conform to the *minhag* of Baghdad, not many such volumes seemed to be easily available. The question remained open and re-emerged a decade later.

In 1934 Dr. Moses Gaster himself was asked about specific liturgical matters concerning the synagogues of the Baghdadis living in Shanghai and in the same year he published in London a ruling that caused much controversy in those communities. This referred to the *Amidah* (prayer) during *Mussaf* (additional service for Saturdays, the first day of the month, holidays and for the intermediate days of Passover and Sukkot), that the Baghdadi community of Shanghai repeated twice, and which Gaster ruled was "not obligatory by any Din." As he wrote:

The Repetition is only a question of Minhag, which however is not the one of the Sephardic Congregations of England and America. and I believe also of Holland, and elsewhere. You write that your congregation follows the Minhag of Baghdad, but this has already been put aside at least fifteen years ago, and it would therefore not be advisable to unsettle it again, especially as there is no Din connected with it. Such changes only

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<sup>38</sup> "Minhag Baghdad and a Standard Prayer Book," *Israel's Messenger* 10, no. 7 (April 6, 1923 - Nissan 20, 5683): 24-25; 24 The *Pitum Haketoret* (Incense offering) is read to obtain protection and open roads towards success. *Anshei Knesset HaGedolah* (Men of the Great Assembly) was the Synod of 120 scribes, sages and prophets who fixed the biblical canon, introduced the feast of Purim, and instituted various prayers, rituals and blessings between 516 and 333 BCE. A *piyyut* is a Jewish liturgical poem. The Kabalistic theory referred to here is usually spelled as Beri'ah or Bryiah and Assiah and can be broadly translated as "creation and action," comprehensive categories of spiritual realms in the Kabbalah in the descending chain of Existence.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

contribute to undermine the validity of the Minhag. It follows also that the Birkhat Kohanim could not be repeated, even if the Amidah should be. The Pittum Haketoret should not be repeated a second time. The incense was offered in the Temple only twice, in the morning and in the afternoon, and not three times.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond the liturgical question itself, the matter concerned the survival of the *minhag* from Baghdad, and is revealing under many respects: it showed the differences between generations in matters of religious practice, and it undermined the claims to uniqueness of the Baghdadi identity as expressed through the religious practice of the older generations of this community. Moreover, Gaster had grouped Baghdadis with other Sephardi Jews, bringing into the open the fact that the *minhag* from Baghdad had not been in use for the previous fifteen years, despite the claims of the older generation to the contrary. In what appears to be a unique case, in 1934 the *Israel's Messenger* published a long article in Judeo-Arabic transliterated in Latin characters that leaked a conversation on this liturgical question between “some elderly men of Iraquian [sic] origin” of the Ohel Rachel synagogue of Shanghai.<sup>41</sup> The article itself is also a most interesting document: it was written in Latin characters, whether because the press did not have Hebrew characters, or because few readers could understand the written language (in Hebrew characters), while they could still understand it in its transliterated form; indirectly, it stated that the newer generations had adopted a broader Sephardi *minhag* and possibly identity, to the point that few could understand the contents of the article transliterated in Latin characters. In the following issue of the *Israel's Messenger*, a prize of \$2 was offered “to a boy or girl between the age of 14 and 18 who can give us the best translation of the dialogue in English.” In the same article, the elderly men whose private dialogue had been leaked were termed “the ‘four musketeers’ from Babylon,” their conversations a “conclave” and their meeting place a “lodge,”<sup>42</sup> somewhat signaling that these liturgical questions that the old generations considered crucial to the group’s identity were not as important for the new ones. The question did not resurface in later issues and from a liturgical point of view at least the majority accepted their

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<sup>40</sup> “Dr. Gaster renders an important Din,” *Israel's Messenger* 31, no. 8 (November 2, 1934 - Heshwan 24, 5695): 8; “Mussaf Amidah and Pittum Haketoreth stir local interest,” *Israel's Messenger* 31, no. 8 (November 2, 1934 - Heshwan 24, 5695): 9-10.

<sup>41</sup> “Mussaf Amidah and Pittum Haketoreth stir local interest to discontinue both – Dialogue in Arabic,” *Israel's Messenger* 31, no. 8 (November 2, 1934 - Heshwan 24, 5695): 8-10.

<sup>42</sup> “That Arabic Dialogue,” *Israel's Messenger* 31, no. 9 (December 7, 1934 - Tebeth 1, 5695): 16.

placement within a broader Sephardi sphere in which the Baghdadi specificity was no longer represented.

Still, in general, it was difficult to find religious texts in South, East and Southeast Asia, and in the 1920s various Baghdadi families residing in one of the Asian hubs sponsored the publication of some religious volumes, writings and *responsa* by famous rabbis of Baghdad. Beyond providing the Baghdadi hubs in Asia with actual religious material, these publications also consolidated relations with the point of origin of this Diaspora by strengthening family connections. I will just give three examples here of a practice that was widespread both among the very wealthy and among some middle-class families. The first comes from Singapore where, in 1905, the magnate Manasseh Meyer had sponsored the building of the new local synagogue; at the same time, he also financed the publication of “the second volume of Bab Pealim by Rabbi Joseph Hayeem [sic] Moses of Baghdad” (Ben Ish Hai), considered one of the living authorities on ritual matters,<sup>43</sup> and head of the community of Baghdad until his death in 1909. A few years later, again in the 1920s, “the children of the late Mrs. Luna Sopher” in Shanghai defrayed the costs of printing the “useful work for burial service adopting the Bagdad [sic] ritual” by Rabbi Hirsch, that was then “distributed gratis to all the Congregations in the Orient, including India and Bagdad [sic].”<sup>44</sup> Referring to this particular volume, the *Israel’s Messenger* gave a partial explanation of why so few religious books were available:

This volume contains the Bagdad Funeral Rite; it was published in Bagdad [sic] in 5633, and is the adopted burial service of the Far Eastern Sephardi communities. Bad and unserviceable as that edition was, it is now out of print, and no longer obtainable. Even the Hazanim [cantors] have to depend on written notes when conducting a funeral service. This publication will, therefore, supply a need that is keenly felt throughout the Far East. The Chinese printer who had no type for the vowel points, nor understood Hebrew experienced the utmost difficulty in producing the Hebrew part of the service. This will account for its in attractive [sic] appearance, as well as for errors in vocalization which could not altogether be eliminated.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “A Valuable Work,” *Israel’s Messenger* 4, no. 5 (June 14, 1907 - Tamuz 2, 5667): 11-12.

<sup>44</sup> “The Burial Service,” *Israel’s Messenger* 11, no. 4 (January 4, 1924 - Nisan 7, 5684): 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

In 1925 Mr. and Mrs. Myers of Shanghai had a “Sepher shel Haftaroth and Sepher Torah” from Baghdad consecrated for the Ohel Rachel Synagogue in Shanghai (financed and built by Sir Jacob Elias Sassoon in 1921) to commemorate the death of Mr. Myer’s mother, Kathoun Buth [sic] Yatter, who had died in Baghdad the previous year aged ninety-two.<sup>46</sup>

***Mobility: A New Leadership for a Transnational Community outside Iraq***

The publishing of these (and other) texts responded to the need to preserve an identity that was also based on religious practice. This became especially urgent from the mid-1920s, when changes in politics, generations and religiosity were seen as threatening such an identity, and the glorious history it represented. At home (Iraq), the government was introducing more stringent discriminatory measures against Jews: from the imposition of opening Jewish schools on Saturday in 1933 to a progressively harder economic boycott which included the *de facto* impossibility to buy/sell lands; from the general incitement against the Jews, that was consistently reported upon from the late 1920s to the 1930s, to the prohibition of buying/selling the *Israel’s Messenger* in 1935, which for obvious reasons received ample coverage on the journal itself. In 1936 N.E.B. Ezra, the founder of the journal, sent a letter to Leonard G. Montefiore<sup>47</sup> summarizing the worsening situation of the Jews of Iraq starting from the local crisis of its religious leadership, which reverberated dramatically in the Asian hubs.

For some years, the Rabbinate [of Iraq] has fallen into desuetude, and is impotent to stop the surge of materialism and indifference which has affected a large number of the youthful section of that Community. At one time Bagdad [sic] was noted for its renowned Rabbanim [Rabbis]; to-day it has need of outside help. [...] Some three years ago, the present writer succeeded in arranging with the kind collaboration of Dr. Leo Jung of New York, the sending of a diligent student from Basra, and who was subsequently enrolled in the New York Yeshiba [sic], and is to-day undergoing a rigid training in preparation for the great work which he will be called upon to perform. Another young student from Rangoon, Burmah [sic], who originally hailed from Bagdad [sic], was equally

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<sup>46</sup> “Consecration of Sepher shel Haftarot and Sepher Torah,” *Israel’s Messenger* II, no. 1 (October 9, 1925 - Tishri 21, 5686): II.

<sup>47</sup> Leonard Nathaniel Goldsmid-Montefiore (1889-1961), not to be confused with Leonard A. Montefiore, the grandnephew of Sir Moses Montefiore.



successful in gaining admission to the same Yeshiba [sic] last year, thanks to Rabbis David Miller, Leo Jung and others. [...] To-day all the professions are over-crowded with the exception of the Rabbinate, for which there is a crying need. I sincerely trust that you will give this letter the deep attention it merits and thus be instrumental in saving the day for the Jewish youth of Asia.<sup>48</sup>

In South, East and Southeast Asia two other phenomena increased a growing sense of insecurity: the inevitable secularization of the new generations of Baghdadi born and raised in Asian lands at a time when religious leaders of the older generations were gradually ageing and retiring, or dying; and the fear that the Baghdadi heritage would be lost because of new generations coming into contact with “Other” Jews: these could be Ashkenazi Jews or, worse of all from a Baghdadi religious and cultural perspective, Jews who had adhered to Reformed Judaism, against which the *Israel’s Messenger* conducted a relentless and constant campaign. In October 1926 it even added a subtitle (that was later dropped) that clearly indicated its stand on the matter: no longer just “Shanghai’s only Jewish organ for the Jewish home” but also “A fearless exponent of traditional Judaism and Jewish nationalism.”

Against what appeared a “religious crisis of Eastern Jewry” or the “deterioration of Oriental Jewry”—news of which came in equally from India, Burma, Singapore, Shanghai and other sites<sup>49</sup>—the Baghdadi communities in the Asian hubs tried to respond with a strategy of recruitment of a new religious leadership.

New rabbis, cantors and scholars could come from Iraq to work in the synagogues and *Talmud Torahs* of Poona, Calcutta, Singapore, Rangoon, Shanghai, Hong Kong; or, they could be “natives of the East with a Western education,” educated in this very same Asian network, or sent to the US for religious education, so that they could then return to Iraq or in one of the Baghdadi Asian communities after

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<sup>48</sup> “Iraq Violating Minority Rights,” *Israel’s Messenger* 29, no. 11 (February 3, 1933 - Shebat 7 5693): 16; “Iraq indicted for violating minority rights” *Israel’s Messenger* 31, no. 8 (November 2, 1934 - Heshwan 4, 5695): 16; “Iraq abuses confidence of League of Nations,” *Israel’s Messenger* 31, no. 8 (November 2, 1934 - Heshwan 4, 5695): 23; “Arab Teacher Beats Children and Iraq’s treachery to Jews & League of Nations,” *Israel’s Messenger* 31, no. 10 (January 4, 1935 - Tebeth 29, 5695): 2 and 6; “The Iraq State and ‘Israel’s Messenger’,” *Israel’s Messenger* 31, no. 11 (February 1, 1935 - Shebat 28, 5695): 6-7; “Iraq lifts up the Ban Against ‘Israel’s Messenger’,” *Israel’s Messenger* 32, no. 2 (May 3, 1935 - Nisan 30, 5695): 19; “Iraq government re-ban ‘Israel’s Messenger’,” *Israel’s Messenger* 32, no. 5 (August 2, 1935 - Ab 3, 5695): 10; “The Rabbinate and the Jews in Iraq. An open letter to Mr. L. G. Montefiore,” *Israel’s Messenger* 32, no. 10 (January 3, 1936 - Tebet 12, 5696): 11.

<sup>49</sup> Elias Levi, “The position of Oriental Jews: Bombay to Bandoeng,” *Israel’s Messenger* 29, no. 4 (November 4, 1932 - Heshwan 5, 5693): 13.

ordination. An example of the former case was the candidate to replace Rabbi Hirsch of Shanghai in 1924: Myer Moses, born in Baghdad, student for many years in a *yeshivah* in Bombay and for a time in England “to secure a secular education and to return to the East as a modern Rabbi” became in this context an ideal candidate to succeed Rabbi Hirsch. As the letter of introduction from London concluded:

If the Shanghai community would be prepared to make a grant—it would not be many hundreds all told—they might secure a man who better understands them and one more in sympathy than a fresh European arrival would be.<sup>50</sup>

Another route was the American one: in 1934 the *Israel's Messenger* published some news about the rabbinical student Rahmin Sion, who had matriculated at Yeshiva College in New York and was now ready to take a course in journalism to establish a “Hebrew paper in Basrah.”<sup>51</sup> As we saw above, N.E.B Ezra had written about him to Leonard G. Montefiore in 1936. In 1932 Elias Levi, whose family had left Baghdad in 1913 and settled in Rangoon, had also been accepted as a student at Yeshiva College where he arrived in 1934 and graduated in 1938. In mid-1939 he was still looking for an appointment, as one can read on the *Israel's Messenger*.

Rabbi Elias Levi, A.B., Graduate of Yeshiva College, New York, is open to receive a “call” from any of the Progressive Jewish Communities of India, Burmah or the Straits Settlement. He will be assisted in his task by Mrs. Elias Levi who is a Graduate of the New Jersey State Teacher's College, Montclair. Together they offer their services as Spiritual Leader and Educator respectively to any Community which wishes to avail itself of this opportunity.<sup>52</sup>

In the end Elias Levi did not return to South, East or Southeast Asia, but remained in the US, serving at Kahal Joseph in Los Angeles, a congregation “that continues

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<sup>50</sup> “The Shanghai Rabbinate,” *Israel's Messenger* 11, no. 6 (March 7, 1924 - Adar Sheni 1, 5684): 1.

<sup>51</sup> “Iraqian prepares for rabbinate in New York,” *Israel's Messenger* 31, no. 3 (June 1, 1934 - Siwan 18, 5694): 2.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Levi Cooper, “Elias Levi: The Rangoon Rabbi,” *Jewish Educational Leadership* 13, no. 1 (2014): 58-62; 61; see also Margot Lurie, “The Boy From Rangoon. How my grandfather landed at Yeshiva University,” *Tablet*, October 27, 2009. Accessed December 28, 2022, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/the-boy-from-rangoon>.

to pride itself on being the only one to follow Baghdadi custom in Western United States.”<sup>53</sup>

Altogether, these campaigns to recruit a new religious leadership did not seem to be particularly successful until much later. Rabbi Ezekiel N. Musleah was one of such success stories: born in Calcutta into a family that had migrated from Baghdad in 1820, Ezekiel N. Musleah graduated at the University of Calcutta and then proceeded to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Ordained as a rabbi in 1952, he served as religious leader of his native community until 1964; then he moved to Philadelphia to work as rabbi of the Congregation Mikveh Israel. Tellingly, his PhD thesis at the Jewish Theological Seminar of New York researched the history of Jews in India, and later became the first scholarly publication on the subject.<sup>54</sup> In different ways, the histories of Rabbis Elias Levi and, later, Ezekiel N. Musleah, show that, for different reasons, by the second half of the twentieth century Baghdadi Jews had started to look beyond London. As the horizon of Sephardi Judaism was contracting in Asia and in the Middle East, it was expanding in other imagined homelands, the US and, in different ways, also in Europe.

Until then, when in need of learned opinions or rabbinical *responsa*, Baghdadis in South, East and Southeast Asia turned to the Rabbis of Baghdad, and later to Rabbis in London. Two well-known controversies showed such religious counseling from outside the Asian areas in which Baghdadis were dwelling: first, a court case in which members of the Bene Israel community in Burma challenged Baghdadis in a British court to establish their right to access and pray at the latter’s synagogue. At the core of this case was the non-recognition of Bene Israel as real Jews by the Baghdadi community of Rangoon, which had therefore excluded them from services in their synagogue. Ascertaining whether they could be considered Jews required the learned opinion of rabbis in Baghdad and of the Great Rabbi of the British Empire in London.<sup>55</sup> Second, the legal controversy over the will and millionaire inheritance of Baghdadi-born and Shanghai-based Silas A.

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<sup>53</sup> Cooper, “Elias Levi,” 62.

<sup>54</sup> Ezekiel N. Musleah, *On the Banks of the Ganga: The Sojourn of Jews in Calcutta* (North Quincy, MA: Christopher Pub. House, 1975). See also “Rabbi Ezekiel Nissim Musleah, Religious leader,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta, accessed December 24, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101851/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable\\_members/rabbi\\_musleah](https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101851/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable_members/rabbi_musleah).

<sup>55</sup> “Elders of Rangoon Jewry lose case in court,” *Israel’s Messenger* 32, no. 4 (July 5, 1935 - Tammuz 4, 5695): 4; See also Fredman Cernea, *Almost Englishmen*. For Baghdadis challenging Bene Israel’s Jewishness in India see Mitch Numark, “Constructing a Jewish Nation in Colonial India: History, Narratives of Discent [sic], and the Vocabulary of Modernity,” *Jewish Social Studies* 7, no.2 (2001): 89-113.

Hardoon (1851-1931). This case too necessarily involved the opinion of rabbis and religious courts from Baghdad and London, when relatives of the deceased from Baghdad raised claims to the inheritance on grounds of family descentance and religious tradition.<sup>56</sup>

### *Mobility: Languages and Travel*

As all these different examples demonstrate, the connections between Iraq and the Asian hubs of the Baghdadi Diaspora continued to flow uninterrupted across continents and generations for decades, touching many private and public aspects of individual, family and collective lives and transforming the identity of this group in multiple ways. Both elite and middle-class Baghdadis moved between countries, studied in various schools and universities across educational traditions, and worked and traded across borders. They also spoke multiple languages, had multiple nationalities and various residences and funded philanthropic endeavors outside the country in which they resided. As a result, most of them embraced an identity that remained *in-between*. The opening lines of the will of Farha (Flora) Sassoon “of Malabar Hill, Bombay, and Bruton Street, London” are very telling in this respect:

I declare that I am, and my late husband, Solomon David Sassoon, were descended from Jewish ancestors of Baghdad, who migrated to India more than 100 years ago; both I and my late husband were born of parents who were domiciled in Bombay, and I still own and maintain as my permanent residence the house in Bombay in which I lived with my husband during his lifetime.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> “Mr. S.A. Hardoon summoned by death,” *Israel’s Messenger* 28, no.4 (July 3, 1931- Tammuz 18, 5691): 14-15; “Buddhist memorial for the late Mr. A.S. Hardoon and Strange burial service in Shanghai,” *Israel’s Messenger* 28, no. 5 (August 1, 1931 - Ab 18, 5691): 8 and 12; “Khan Bahadour Ezra S. Hardoon contests the will of his next of kin the late Mr S. A. Hardoon,” *Israel’s Messenger* 32, no. 10 (March 3, 1936 – Tebet 12, 5696): 7; “The Hardoon will case,” *Israel’s Messenger* 33, no. 9 [B] (January 15, 1937- Shebat 3, 5697); 16-19; “Hardoon appeal pending,” *Israel’s Messenger* 34, no. 12 (March 18, 1938 - Adar II 15, 5698): 16; “Hardoon will case revived again,” *Israel’s Messenger* 38, no. 7 (October 17, 1941 - Tishre 26, 5702): 11; “Miss Liza Hardoon,” *Israel’s Messenger* 38, no. 7 (October 17, 1941 - Tishre 26, 5702): 14.

<sup>57</sup> “Mrs. Flora Solomon David Sassoon,” *Israel’s Messenger* 33, no. 1 (April 3, 1933 - Nisan 11, 5696): 15.

The languages they used, the clothes they wore and the food that they ate or served in their receptions are other indicators.<sup>58</sup> In 1859 Jacob Sapir arrived in Bombay; he was a well-known rabbi and an emissary from Palestine who in 1866 published an extensive travelogue (*Even Sapir*) of his trip to India and all the way to Australia.<sup>59</sup> Joseph Sassoon has reproduced some excerpts of this travelogue in his work where he described the Baghdadi community of Bombay:

the language of the Jews in their house and between themselves was Arabic, their mother tongue, and their customs and habits, their manners... were without any change or modification. They had neither changed their language nor their mode of dress, nor their way of living.<sup>60</sup>

As we saw above, Judeo-Arabic was a *lingua franca* for business; it was also used in the private sphere, inside families and, to a certain extent for matters pertaining liturgy. As Simon Ballas from Singapore recalled: “Arabic was the main language spoken among the Jews” together with Malay. Speaking about the 1930s, he recalled:

[my father] never learned how to speak English. My mother [...] doesn't speak English. She speaks Malay and Arabic and that's about all. I speak to her in Arabic. [...] Hebrew was not spoken, it was the language of the Bible.<sup>61</sup>

As Zvi Yehuda reminds us, until 1901 there existed five Jewish newspapers in Judeo-Arabic of the Baghdad variation that were published in India.<sup>62</sup> These played a fundamental role at the time when the “Ottoman authorities refused to allow the publication of a Jewish newspaper in Baghdad [...] not only for Baghdadi Jews in the Far East but also for the Jews of Baghdad, who regularly sent these

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<sup>58</sup> Sassoon, *The Sassoons*, 149-150.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Marks, “Jacob Sapir’s Journey through Southern India in 1860: Four Chapters on Indian Life from Even Sapir. Translated, Annotated and Introduced,” *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 13, (2013): 73-95; 75. See also Mathias B. Lehman, *Emissaries from the Holy Land: The Sephardic Diaspora and the Practice of Pan-Judaism in the Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 261-275.

<sup>60</sup> Sassoon, *The Sassoons*, 139.

<sup>61</sup> NAS, Communities of Singapore (part 1), Accession Number 000163, *Interview to Jacob Ballas*, December 6, 1983, Transcript Reel/Disc 2, *Interview to Jacob Ballas*, Transcript, p. 14.

<sup>62</sup> *Doresh Tob le-Ammo*, published in Bombay from 1855 to 1866; *Mebasser*, published in Calcutta from 1873 to 1877; *Pērah*, published in Calcutta from 1878 to 1889; *Magid Mesharim*, published in Calcutta from 1889 to 1899; *Shoshana*, published in Calcutta in 1901.

newspapers reports about events in the community, both via reporters stationed in Baghdad and via members of the community itself.”<sup>63</sup> *Shoshana* (1901) was the last of the periodical publications in Judeo-Arabic, and new ones in English (from India, China and later Singapore) followed.

Beyond language, another more “modern” way to show attachment to the Baghdadi heritage was travel. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century tourism and leisure travel became one of the new ways to confirm one’s social status and provide a sentimental as well as a classical education to the younger generations, as the extensive literature on the European *grand tours* has shown. In time, travels that only the elites could undertake became available also to others.<sup>64</sup> For some, travels and tours also represented an opportunity to explore one’s own roots. Joseph Sassoon has described the trip that Farha (Flora) Sassoon—the nephew of David and the wife of her great-uncle Suleiman—undertook in 1910 with her three children as “retracing in reverse David Sassoon’s flight eight decades earlier;” their party visited some of the thirty-seven synagogues of Baghdad, the tombs of ancient Jewish prophets and rabbis and David (Farha’s son) “went out hunting for antique books and Bibles.”<sup>65</sup> David (Suleiman/Solomon) Sassoon would become a rabbi and, most importantly, one of the greatest collectors of Hebrew manuscripts of the twentieth century, especially from the Middle East. In 1935 he published a memoir of this family trip that reads at the same time as an anthropological study, an exercise in travel literature, and a research into an individual and collective heritage.<sup>66</sup> The diary of another child who took part in this trip, Mozelle, is also available in parts.<sup>67</sup> David Suleiman returned from this trip loaded with some of the Hebrew manuscripts that made the core of his famed collection, which represented yet another way to come into contact with, and

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<sup>63</sup> Zvi Yehuda, “Jewish press in India in Baghdadi Judeo-Arabic as an indispensable source for the history of Iraqi Jews in the nineteenth century,” in *The Baghdadi Jews in India*, ed. Weil, 145-162; 145.

<sup>64</sup> For just two examples see Lynne Withey, *Grand Tours and Cook’s Tours: A History of Leisure Travel, 1750 to 1915* (New York: W. Morrow, 1997); Keith Hanley and John K. Walton, *Constructing Cultural Tourism: John Ruskin and the Tourist Gaze* (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Channel View Publications, 2010).

<sup>65</sup> Sassoon, *The Sassoons*, 199.

<sup>66</sup> Rabbi David Salomon Sassoon, *M’sa Bavel* [*Journey to Babylon*, Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1935), available at Otzar HaChochma <https://tablet.otzar.org/#/book/149421/p/-1/t/827980/fs/o/start/o/end/o/c>, accessed December 4, 2022.

<sup>67</sup> “The Sassoon’s return visit to Baghdad. A Diary by Mozelle Sassoon,” *The Scribe* 74 (2001). Accessed January 5, 2023, <http://www.dangoor.com/74007.html>.

eventually own, an individual and collective heritage that was gradually disappearing *in loco*.<sup>68</sup>

This deep cultural, linguistic and religious attachment to the broader Middle East, and particularly to Iraq, started to change in the first half of the twentieth century, as a new generation born in the Asian diaspora came of age during the political changes caused by the end of the British Mandate over Mesopotamia and the establishment of the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq (1932). From being a real place where one could go back to study, conduct business, visit family or choose a bride, in the early 1930s Iraq became a less accessible country, slowly sliding into a mythical and symbolic dimension, a source of collective identity in terms of religious, cultural and linguistic heritage. Even the publication of the Babylonian Talmud, one of the cornerstones of this complex and multi-layered identity underwent a similar process: in 1921 the *Israel's Messenger* was advertising the delivery “to your door of the Babylonian Talmud, ornament to every Jewish house.”<sup>69</sup> Twelve years later, the journal published a long article to inform its readers of the publication and availability of the very same item in the “first complete and unabridged English translation [...] edited by the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire.”<sup>70</sup>

## Europe

As we saw above, since the mid nineteenth century London was the main pole of attraction for many Baghdadis, especially those belonging to the elites, as the capital of the transnational imperial space in which they had been moving since they left Iraq. As it is well known, David Sassoon, the family patriarch, had already signed his certificate of naturalization as a British subject in 1853 in Hebrew; several of the fourteen sons and daughters of David Sassoon had anglicized their names (Abdallah-Albert; Shalom Sassoon-Artur; Farha-Flora, Faraj-Hayyim-Frederick etc.) and some of them were knighted from 1890 onward. Right up to the turn of

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<sup>68</sup> David S. Sassoon, *Ohel Dawid: Descriptive catalogue of the Hebrew and Samaritan Manuscripts in the Sassoon Library* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932). David Solomon Sassoon also directly negotiated purchases for items that entered the Valmadonna Trust Library. See LaVerne L. Poussaint, “From Babylonia to Bombay to Burma: Sojourning through Asian Hebraica by Way of New York,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 10, no. 2 (2009): 122-143.

<sup>69</sup> *Israel's Messenger* 8, no. 4 (August 5, 1921 - Ab 1, 5681): 20 and 41.

<sup>70</sup> *Israel's Messenger* 30, no. 4 (June 2, 1933 - Siwan 8, 5693): 6 and 14.

the twentieth century, “if asked, most members of the Sassoons would have described themselves as Baghdadi Jews first and foremost.”<sup>71</sup> By the 1920, they considered themselves fully English: by then, they had been accepted by British aristocracy, were close to royals, and Sir Philip Sassoon (grandson of Albert Abdallah) had been elected to the British Parliament. As the symbols that they chose for their coat of arms show, the Sassoons still continued to negotiate their belonging to different countries and cultures: the mottoes were in Hebrew and Latin; under a dove carrying an olive branch was the rose of England next to a lion of Judah; the botanical choice fell on a palm tree and an opium poppy, that had made much of the family’s fortunes. This very same crest was then reproduced on numerous family artifacts, like the silver tray auctioned by Kedem in November 2015; or the porcelain dish set auctioned in a Sotheby’s single owner sale in Tel Aviv on October 25 and 27, 2000.<sup>72</sup> As Joseph Sassoon writes: “when a relative arrived from India or China, the Society Sassoons would be slightly disconcerted, as this was an untimely reminder of their non-Society existence.”<sup>73</sup> In a brochure of the early 1920s describing Ashley Park, one of the family mansions in England, the Sassoon crest appeared “shorn of the Hebrew motto [...] and the family [was] identified as originating from Toledo in Spain, whose exiles were evidently more prestigious than their counterparts in Babylon.”<sup>74</sup> Whether to refute this idea, to support it, or just to collect news that concerned the family, on one of his trips to Europe Victor Sassoon cut a newspaper article claiming (erroneously) that the Sassoons were from Toledo in Spain and that one of them had been a Cabalist in Venice.<sup>75</sup> Other Baghdadis from the elites followed the same or a similar path, like Eliezer (Ellis) Kedorie and his family; others really were of Spanish (and then Venetian) origin, like Emanuel Belilios, whose family history, trading networks and whereabouts have been amply researched by Francesca Trivellato.<sup>76</sup> From the mid-1920s onward, Spain started to acquire a significant cultural and political role

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<sup>71</sup> Sassoon, *The Sassoons*, 141.

<sup>72</sup> Kedem Auction House, Auction 53, Lot 120, <https://www.kedem-auctions.com/en/content/large-silver-tray-sassoon-family-crest>; and Sotheby’s, Judaica, Lot 30, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2013/judaica-no9060/lot.30.html>, both accessed December 3, 2022.

<sup>73</sup> Sassoon, *The Sassoons*, 242-243.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>76</sup> Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). See also “Emanuel Belilios, Business,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta, accessed December 24, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101841/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable\\_members/emanuel-belilios](https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101841/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable_members/emanuel-belilios).



in this history, even though, as we shall see, in an entirely different way. In the following decade, Paris and New York also entered the picture.

The second part of this article is therefore divided in four sections: first, I discuss some of the critical implications of considering Baghdadis as British, as having European roots or as having become Europeans. Second, I compare them to some brief case studies of Baghdadis that did not take the European route but stayed in South, East and Southeast Asia, and especially India. Third, I examine how these European imaginary homelands were articulated within the broader horizon of Sephardi Jewry from the 1930s. Finally, I consider the political and cultural construction of Spain as another imagined homeland for Baghdadis and other Sephardi Jews on the pages of the *Israel's Messenger* from 1925 onward, while Paris and New York were also rising to new prominence as sites where to elaborate a new Sephardi identity for the twentieth century.

### *The “Rothschilds of the East”?*

Since the founding volume by Cecil Roth on the Sassoon dynasty (1941),<sup>77</sup> the fascination with the (male) path-breakers of this history, and with the elites has consistently placed Baghdadis in the company of other European businessmen, both in Asian cities or in a European context. In Shanghai, for instance, they have been clustered with so-called Shanghailanders, other non-Jewish foreigners residing in the International Settlement and making business in the city. In Europe, their marriage strategies have been analyzed as key to enter the highest ranks of Jewish and non-Jewish aristocracy. Abraham Shalom (Arthur) Sassoon—one of the sons of David—married Eugenie Louise Perugia from Trieste in 1873 and other European marriages followed in later generations, with the Poliakovs of Moscow, the de Gunzburgs of St. Petersburg and the Rothschilds of Paris and London.<sup>78</sup> Within the space of two generations since their departure from Baghdad, the Sassoons were often compared to the historically most affluent Jewish families of bankers: the Rothschilds, the Ephrussis, the de Camondos, and even the Lehmans, and to other transnational Jewish families that raised immense fortunes in a few generations and whose lines of descent have at times interlocked.

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<sup>77</sup> Cecil Roth, *The Sassoon Dynasty* (London: R. Hale, 1941).

<sup>78</sup> Sassoon, *The Sassoons*, 133.

In 1908 a brief article on the *Israel's Messenger* presented the Rothschilds and the Sassoons on the same footing,<sup>79</sup> in a way anticipating the fortunate, exotic and misleading definition of the Sassoons as “the Rothschilds of the East.” This analogy, which is still very much in use today, is problematical for various reasons: first, it adopts uncritically the narrative of the Baghdadi magnates themselves, that helped build this cultural construction with their eagerness to be recognized as members of the British elite in the colonial world in which they lived. Secondly, as it is known, taking the Rothschilds as a yardstick to measure wealth is always very questionable. In this specific context, it is also wrong: the princely fortunes of the Sassoons had longer and more distinguished roots than those of any other European Jewish banking and/or aristocratic family. They had begun with the appointment of Sheikh Sassoon ben Saleh, father of David Sassoon, as chief treasurer (*Sarraf Bashi*) to the governors of Baghdad (*pashas*) between 1781 and 1817, a role that came with the appointment to the leadership of the Jewish community of Baghdad (*Hacham Bashi*), and their fortunes continued to grow through the generations and across continents. From this perspective, the Rothschilds appeared only bankers who had entered the world of finance and trading in recent times. Moreover, the Rothschilds lacked the global outreach of the Sassoons, that the «North-China Herald» in 1881 summarized for its readers in this way:

The name of Sassoon is less known in Europe than that of Rothschild, but among Arab or Banyan traders, even with Chinese and Japanese merchants, in the Straits as well on both sides of the Ganges, it is a name to conjure with; and the strange ignorance of these facts [...] which once prevailed in England has long been dispelled.<sup>80</sup>

The author of this article underestimated the generalized sense of European superiority that would continue to make the Rothschild better known than any other banking and aristocratic Jewish family for generations, precisely because of their European origin as opposed to the Arab/Asian one of the Sassoons, the Kedorries, the Ezras and other families of the Baghdadi elites. Finally, this analogy shifts the focus of this history away from the sites where these economic fortunes originated and were consolidated, thus detaching elite Baghdadis from their point of origin and from the areas wherein they moved, the Middle East and South, East

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<sup>79</sup> “The Rothschilds and the Sassoons,” *Israel's Messenger* 4, no. 23 (February 21, 1908 - Adar 19, 5663): 6.

<sup>80</sup> Sassoon, *The Sassoons*, 144-145.

and Southeast Asia and where other Baghdadis that belonged to the middle classes continued to dwell for generations.

*Baghdadis Staying: A Few Examples from India*

Rather than associating these businessmen with their European counterparts on account of their wealth and aspirations to nobility, it would be more fruitful make local comparisons. Other Jewish and non-Jewish merchants and traders built fortunes that were no less impressive, and their global economic outreach was no less vast; many of them remained on site (until the early 1950s and after), and many of them joined the rising professional middle classes, especially in the second and third generations. Some married local Jews in India and even Ashkenazi Jews in Shanghai and Hong Kong.

For reasons of space, I mention here only a few examples; they show that while business and trade might have been the starting point of most Baghdadis in India, the following generations embraced diverse careers and professional activities that did not necessarily bring them to London or elsewhere in Europe, but kept them there. Rather, their geographical horizon often took them further East, from India to Hong Kong for instance, or from Shanghai to Australia.<sup>81</sup>

Joseph Ezra Baher had arrived from Baghdad in Calcutta in 1821 via Bombay. His son David Joseph Ezra (1796-1882) became a trader in indigo and silk and exported opium; he worked as an “agent for Arab ships arriving in Calcutta from Muscat and Zanzibar importing dates and other produce from their countries in exchange for rice, sugar and other food items.” Like other Baghdadis he had invested in real estate and, when he died in 1882, he was the largest property owner in Calcutta.<sup>82</sup> A similar story from later generations is that of Benjamin Nissim Elias (1865-1943) who created a vast economic empire based on jute and rubber, and then expanded his activities to other fields: bone mills, tobacco, electric supply, engineering, dairy, as well as real estate. His greatest rivals were not (necessarily, or only) the Sassoons, but rather the Tatas and the Birlas, Indian companies that, as it is well known, are global business conglomerates today.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> HKHP, Oral History Collection, Io84, Leigh Masel.

<sup>82</sup> “David Joseph Ezra, Business,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta, accessed December 24, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101852/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/not\\_able\\_members/david\\_j\\_ezra](https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101852/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/not_able_members/david_j_ezra).

<sup>83</sup> See Aditya Birla Group at <https://www.adityabirla.com> and Tata at [www.tata.com](http://www.tata.com). See also, “B. N. Elias, Business,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta,

Looking at the second and third generations, the picture becomes even more diversified: D.J. Cohen (1883-?), for example, sat on the boards of various educational institutions and hospitals and held important institutional roles as a member of the Bengal legislative council from 1921 to 1947.<sup>84</sup> Other examples come from all walks of life: Josh Solomon Joshua (1920-?), trained as a policeman who reached the rank of Superintendent of Police, was posted to Darjeeling.<sup>85</sup> The most famous military man was Jack Farj Rafeal Jacob (1921-2016) who, as Chief of Staff of the Eastern Command of India, played a crucial role in the victory of India over Pakistan after it had occupied Bangladesh in 1971.<sup>86</sup> J.R. Jacob owned and directed the B.N. Elias conglomerate, that owned and manufactured jute, tobacco, cigarettes, dealt in real estate and maintained other commercial interests. His son Bernard (Bunny) Jacob was a musician and became the last conductor of the Calcutta Symphony Orchestra.<sup>87</sup> Eddie Joseph, instead, was an internationally recognized magician, making over thirty broadcasts from the All India Radio stations in Calcutta, Bombay and Lucknow.<sup>88</sup>

Many other examples could be quoted that, together, show how varied and diversified was the group usually referred collectively as Baghdadi Jews, and that they were not just a group of magnates and a commercial elite aspiring to join British high society and aristocracy and move to London. In this respect, embedding the middle classes—and even more so the even larger group that lived

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[https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101958/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable\\_members/b-n-elias](https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101958/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable_members/b-n-elias). All accessed December 24, 2022.

<sup>84</sup> “D. J. Cohen, Community leader,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta, accessed December 24, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101934/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable\\_members/d-j-cohen](https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101934/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable_members/d-j-cohen).

<sup>85</sup> “Josh Solomon Joshua, Asst Superintendent of Police,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta, accessed December 24, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101850/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable\\_members/josh-solomon-joshua](https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101850/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable_members/josh-solomon-joshua).

<sup>86</sup> “J F R Jacob, Army,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta, accessed December 24, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101850/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable\\_members/j-f-r-jacob](https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101850/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable_members/j-f-r-jacob). On Jacob Farj Rapheal see the short film by Manu Chobe, *Mukti. Birth of a Nation*, 2017, available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bGdIAf2J\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bGdIAf2J_k), accessed December 25, 2022. See also J.F.R. Jacob, *Surrender at Dacca. Birth of a Nation* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1997); Jacob, *An Odyssey in War and Peace. An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2011).

<sup>87</sup> “Bernard Jacob, Musician,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta, accessed December 24, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101933/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable\\_members/bernard\\_jacob](https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101933/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable_members/bernard_jacob).

<sup>88</sup> “Eddie Joseph, Magician,” Recalling Jewish Calcutta, accessed December 24, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101842/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable\\_members/eddie\\_joseph](https://web.archive.org/web/20200128101842/http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable_members/eddie_joseph).

below poverty and on Jewish charity—into the history of Baghdadi Jews in South, East and Southeast Asia provides a more comprehensive and articulated understanding of their individual and collective path.

As a large Baghdadi middle class gradually diversified in various contexts in South, East and Southeast Asia, and as new generations were developing new differentiated local identities, the *Israel's Messenger* started to put forward a new case for a European origin—and an eventual mythical return—of Baghdadis (and Sephardi Jews more generally) to Spain, as the new original starting point and imaginary homeland of the Baghdadi diaspora. The more the real Baghdad disappeared, the more that heritage became associated with past glories imagined in connection with medieval Spain, Maimonides and a broader Sephardi/Oriental/Eastern Jewish identity which, however, also appeared to be inexorably declining.<sup>89</sup> The construction of this narrative can be understood as a reaction to a combination of various factors: a decline in Sephardi identity in connection to the collapse of the rabbinical authority of Baghdad from the mid-1930s; the rise to centrality and normativity of Ashkenazi Judaism in Jewish world affairs, that was perceived as aggressive and discriminating (as political Zionism developed in Eastern Europe and from there came the first immigration waves to Ottoman and then Mandatory Palestine);<sup>90</sup> and the growing importance of American Jewry and the spread of Reform Judaism. It is to these points that I now briefly turn.

### *Oriental/Eastern/Sephardi Jewry*

Whether seen from the US, the Middle East (including Tel Aviv) or indeed from South, East, and Southeast Asia, Baghdadi Jews described the broader Sephardi identity to which they belonged as lying in ruins, impoverished from a religious and spiritual point of view, lacking religious leadership, and not sufficiently understood by Ashkenazi Zionism, which underestimated and undervalued the potential of its human, intellectual and spiritual contribution.

Already in 1925, Rabbi Benzion M. Ouziel, the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Jaffa and Salonika (who would become the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel in 1938), had written to the *Israel's Messenger* describing “the lethargic sleep” that had fallen “upon the dispersed Sephardi Communities.” He continued by

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<sup>89</sup> I use the term Sephardi here, rather than the more accurate *Mizrabi* or the more political Arab Jewish identity, as this is the term used in the original sources.

<sup>90</sup> “Sephardim and Ashkenazim,” *Israel's Messenger* 25, no. 8 (November 2, 1928 – Heshwan 19, 5689): 4-6.

warning that “there might come a time, which may be not very far off but quite near, when in all the large Communities in the East, there will be no cantors, no teachers nor Rabbis to lead these scattered sons of the Diaspora, in the light of the great traditions of Judaism.”<sup>91</sup> His words reflected the search that Baghdadis from the various Asian hubs were conducting in Baghdad, London and New York for new rabbis, cantors, ritual slaughterers, that we saw above. They were also echoed by J.E. Joshua from Rangoon who in 1929 provided a bleak picture of the decline, isolation, lack of vision, teachers and leaders; most of all, he described each synagogue from Karachi to Shanghai “as a kingdom, independent and all by itself (...),” a situation in which “the Jewish communities of Bombay, Rangoon, Calcutta, Singapore, Hongkong and Shanghai have remained more like aliens to each other and their activities were not characterized by any cooperation.”<sup>92</sup> This picture strongly contradicts the idea of a connected diaspora, or of a network between the different hubs of their Diaspora and with Baghdad, which instead works well in describing Baghdadis in their commercial activities and family relationships. These depressing descriptions of an unstoppable decay returned often in this newspaper, regardless of the geographical perspective, from Asia,<sup>93</sup> the Middle East and even South America.<sup>94</sup>

Salvation appeared to come from the West, more than from the Asian countries in which many Baghdadis had made a (good) living, or from a Zionist ideology that was generally dominated by Ashkenazi Jews who did not appear to know or value the glories of the Sephardi past. Here an altogether different picture was taking shape: in Paris, for example, where the establishment of a World Confederation of Sephardic Jews announced in 1932 had raised great hopes of a Sephardi religious and cultural revival, given the role of France in the countries and mandates where the majority of Sephardi Jews lived at the time (considering both the *Maghreb* and the *Mashreq*).<sup>95</sup> Even more optimistic was the perspective emerging from the US, where a beacon of light was represented by the inspirational leadership and scholarship of Rabbi David De Sola Pool in New York, Rabbi Abraham A. Neuman in Philadelphia and by the later consecration of a new Sephardic Synagogue in Los Angeles under the leadership of Rabbi

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<sup>91</sup> “Chief Rabbi Bension Ouziel on Sephardic Jewry,” *Israel’s Messenger* 10, no. 7 [B] (April 3, 1925 - Nisan 10, 5685): 10.

<sup>92</sup> “The Decline of Oriental Jewry. A telling indictment,” *Israel’s Messenger* 29, no. 10 (January 1, 1933 - Tebeth 3, 5693): 29.

<sup>93</sup> “Sephardim Jewry awake!,” *Israel’s Messenger* 24, no. 4 (July 8, 1927 - Tammuz 8, 5687): 4.

<sup>94</sup> “Sephardim Jews and Judaism in the Orient,” *Israel’s Messenger* 11, no. 3 [B] (December 4, 1925 - Kislev 17, 5686): 9-11.

<sup>95</sup> “Reviving Sephardic Jewry,” *Israel’s Messenger* 29, no. 6 (September 1, 1932 - Elul 1, 5692): 4-5.

Salomon I. Mizrahi, thanks to the sponsorship of members of the Shanghai Baghdadi community.<sup>96</sup> As mentioned above, this is where Elias Levi eventually found a position.

While the decay of Sephardi culture was amplified by the increasingly influential religious and ideological developments taking place in the Ashkenazi world, the former continued to maintain its relevance for some time still, when the Baghdadi community, and the magnates among them in particular, responded generously to the call for help of the tens of thousands Jews from Germany and Central Europe who started to arrive in Shanghai in the late 1930s and where they remained for about a decade. At the same time, before 1936, another European country acquired the features of an imagined homeland.

### *Spain/Sefarad*

Starting from 1925, the *Israel's Messenger* started to construct a case for Spain as an “old-new” country of origin where there existed the realistic possibility of obtaining citizenship for Jews with original papers from Turkey that could prove Iberian descent. Here Sephardi Jews (and Baghdadis too) would find a place in the restoration of the ancient glories of a faraway past. As if the flow of time was uninterrupted, in this cultural and political construction Spain came to represent a foundational myth and an “imagined community,”<sup>97</sup> a homeland, and, possibly, also another way to make the individual and collective origins of the Baghdadi elites more European.

Spain as the site of the Baghdadi origins could also deliver important practical outcomes in the 1930s. One of these was the readiness of Spain to grant citizenship to those Jews of Iberian descent who would care to apply. This responded to a political and cultural construction: Baghdadis in Shanghai, and the *Israel's Messenger* in particular, connected with members of the Spanish government known for their philo-sephardism. Between 1924 and 1934 the Government of Spain had undertaken various administrative and political steps to grant citizenship to Jews that were eager to connect to their Spanish roots, in what appeared to be a forthcoming Sephardic renaissance in Spain, supported by

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<sup>96</sup> “Sephardim Jewry,” *Israel's Messenger* 24, no. 11 (February 3, 1928 - Shebat 12, 5688): 4; “Sephardic Jewry in Los Angeles consecrate synagogue,” *Israel's Messenger* 32, no. 4 (July 5, 1935 - Tammuz 4, 5695): 9.

<sup>97</sup> Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London-New York: Verso, 2006).

numerous politicians and intellectuals. Famously, Dr. Angel Pulido Fernandez, physician and vice-president of the Spanish Senate, referred to Sephardi Jews as “Spaniards without Fatherland”<sup>98</sup> and the *Israel Messenger* adopted him as a representative of the “the real soul of Spain.” In this context, Baghdadis in Shanghai also emphasized the new centrality given in Spain to the “Science of Judaism at the University of Madrid,” “the issue of a decree by King Alphonso [sic] permitting Sephardi Jews to become Spanish subjects” and the government’s contribution of Spanish books to the library of the newly established Hebrew University.”<sup>99</sup> These contemporary acts were presented only as the final act of an “immortal glorious epoch of the history of the Jewish people which had its setting during many centuries” in Spain.<sup>100</sup>

On April 7, 1931 the government of Spain “had taken steps to facilitate the naturalization of Spanish speaking Jews” and the new Republican government of 1931 confirmed the possibility to obtain citizenship; no exact numbers were available as to how many Sephardi Jews existed in the world at the time, but the estimate was about one million “to be found in Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Algeria, Tunis, Morocco, Tripoli and Egypt.”<sup>101</sup> A few months later, the *Israel’s Messenger* reported enthusiastically that the ministers of Justice (Alvaro Albornoz), of the Interior (Miguel Maura) and of Finance (Indalecio Prieto) had

declared that an ordinance granting equal rights to all citizens of Spain has now been promulgated and will shortly be made public. Discussing the position of the Jews in Spain with the correspondent of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, the cabinet ministers took occasion to voice their unanimous determination to extend to the Jews equal rights with all other citizens without discrimination of any sort and their desire of bringing this to public attention as soon as possible.<sup>102</sup>

Baghdadis believed they could also be included in this large Sephardi Diaspora and, in order to give a cultural dimension to this political aspiration, the *Israel’s*

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<sup>98</sup> Alisa Meyuhas Ginio, “El encuentro del senador español Dr. Ángel Pulido Fernández con los judíos del Norte de Marruecos,” *El Presente. Estudios sobre la cultura sefardí* 2 (2008): III-26.

<sup>99</sup> “Spain and Jewry,” *Israel’s Messenger* 10, no. 7 [B] (April 3, 1925 - Nisan 10, 5685): 4-5; “Spanish Government issues decree inviting Sephardim Jews to become Spanish subjects,” *Israel’s Messenger* 10, no. 7 [B] (April 3, 1925 - Nisan 10, 5685): 17-18.

<sup>100</sup> Dr. Angel Pulido, “The Sephardic Movement in Spain,” *Israel’s Messenger* 10, no. 7 [B] (April 3, 1925 - Nisan 10, 5685): 25-26.

<sup>101</sup> “Sephardic Jews Invited to Return to Spain,” *Israel’s Messenger* 28, no. 4 (July 3, 1931 - Tammuz 18, 5691): 32.

<sup>102</sup> “Immigration favored in Spain,” *Israel’s Messenger* 28, no. 4 (July 3, 1931 - Tammuz 18, 5691): 32.



*Messenger* presented a narrative imbued with nostalgia where Spain was depicted as a Sephardi lost paradise, whether the one before 1492, or even afterwards. This imagined Spain/*Sefarad* never took the place of Baghdad in the Baghdadi Diaspora's imagination (as reflected in the pages of the *Israel Messenger*), but nevertheless it played an important role in terms of identity: by adding *Sefarad* before Baghdad to their heritage, Baghdadis in Asia could still imagine themselves as the carriers of an important tradition originating from a mythical place, and not from a real city that had become increasingly hostile to Jews.

Politicians and intellectuals from Spain contributed to such a nostalgic construction on the *Israel's Messenger*, and so did authors and commentators from Baghdad. Sephardi life in Spain was presented as being historically shaped by foundational characters like Ibn Gvirol (c. 1022-1070?), Yehuda Ha-Levi (1075-1141), Abraham Ben-Ezra (1089-1164), Maimonides (1135-1204), and the later Abravanel (1437-1508), "all products of the Jewish Renaissance in Spain who have added glorious chapters to the history of Judaism."<sup>103</sup> Writing especially for the *Israel's Messenger*, Jose M. Estrugo (Smyrna 1888-Havana 1962), a well-known public intellectual of the Sephardi sphere, celebrated the "peaceful and contented atmosphere which pervaded the 'Juderia' of a city in Turkey [Smyrna]" where he had grown up, the sweetness of "the old Andalusian music, the sermon which the Chief Rabbi delivered in perfect medieval Spanish."<sup>104</sup> One of the cornerstones of this cultural and political construction was the celebration and memorialization of the historical character of Maimonides, that featured regularly on the pages of the *Israel's Messenger* between 1934 and 1938, starting from the eight hundredth anniversary of his birth in Cordova in 1935.<sup>105</sup> Numerous articles focused on the celebrations organized in Spain, in Cairo, in England, in New York and among Sephardim worldwide, and on the tribute paid by different religious leaders.<sup>106</sup> Some articles described the initiatives of Baghdadi Jews in Bombay and Shanghai to join the celebrations,<sup>107</sup> while others retraced his life and intellectual achievements as a teacher, writer and physician. Special emphasis was placed on his

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<sup>103</sup> "Yehuda Halevi's defense of his Faith," *Israel's Messenger* 11, no. 6 (March 5, 1926 - Adar 19, 5686): 3.

<sup>104</sup> Jose M. Estrugo, "Ancient Jewish life in Spain," *Israel's Messenger* 11, no. 6 (March 5, 1926 - Adar 19, 5686): 12.

<sup>105</sup> "800th Anniversary of Moses Maimonides' Birth Cairo and Cordova Celebrations: Call to General Jewry," *Israel's Messenger* 31, no. 7 (October 5, 1934 - Tishri 26, 5695): 9.

<sup>106</sup> "Maimonides Tribute by Christian, Moslem and Jew in honour of the 800<sup>th</sup> birthday of Moses Maimonides," *Israel's Messenger* 32, no. 2 (May 3, 1935 - Nisan 30, 5695): 27.

<sup>107</sup> "Rambam 800th anniversary," *Israel's Messenger* 31, no. 12 (March 6, 1935 - Adar Sheni 1, 5695): 13.

dwelling among Moslems<sup>108</sup> and on his ability to unite peoples of different faiths. When in 1938 Rabbi Yaluz of Tiberias suggested that a monument in Tiberias be erected in honor of Maimonides, the *Israel's Messenger* gave wide resonance to the initiative

to render homage to the memory of the sage in consideration of the 800th anniversary of his birth which was recently celebrated. Such a monument, says Rabbi Yaluz, would serve to reflect credit on the Jewish people and to focus world-wide attention on their cultural contributions to civilization. The name of Maimonides is revered by Jews and Mohammedans as belonging to a man supreme in the branches of science and philosophy of his time. [...] In times of stress when the Jewish nation was in danger he instilled in his co-religionists life, courage and unity.<sup>109</sup>

This appears particularly significant as these were indeed times of great stress for Jews (and others) worldwide; as these words were being printed in Shanghai, Jewish refugees from Germany and Central Europe had already started to flock to the well-known “port of last resort.” In this context therefore, celebrating Maimonides was also a way to motivate and support other Jews and to extend a helping hand. As Rabbi Yaluz had embarked on a fundraising trip to erect the monument for Maimonides, “the Shanghai Jewish Community lent their whole-hearted support to the scheme outlined above as a glowing tribute to the greatest Jew of Medieval times.”<sup>110</sup>

The beginning of the Spanish civil war in 1936 led to the collapse of the whole scheme; this was resumed only in 2015, when both Spain and Portugal passed nationality laws that allow descendants of Sephardi Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, or forced to convert to Christianity, to claim citizenship status through naturalization as a form of restorative justice.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> “Moses Maimonides,” *Israel's Messenger* 31, no. 12 (March 6, 1935 - Adar Sheni 1, 5695): 4; S. S. Levin, “The Eight centenary of the Birth of Maimonides,” *Israel's Messenger* 32, no. 1 (April 5, 1935 - Nisan 2, 5695): 11; “Moses Maimonides As A Physician” 32, no. 1 (April 5, 1935 - Nisan 2, 5695): 26; “Moses Maimonides-An Eminent Sage in Israel” 32, no. 1 (April 5, 1935 - Nisan 2, 5695): 27.

<sup>109</sup> “A Monument to Maimonides,” *Israel's Messenger* 35, no. 4 (July 12, 1938 - Tammuz 13, 5698): 8

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> For a recent perspective on applicants, see Rina Benmayor and Dalia Kandiyoti, “Ancestry, Genealogy, and Restorative Citizenship. Oral Histories of Sephardi Descendants Reclaiming Spanish and Portuguese Nationality,” in *Genealogies of Sepharad*, eds. Daniela Flesler, Michal R. Friedman and Asher Salah, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* 18, (2020), 219-251. On the shortcomings of this program see Nicholas Casey, “Spain Pledged Citizenship to Sephardic

## Conclusions

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the relationship between the Baghdadis in Iraq and in South, East and Southeast Asia continued to develop in many directions, and Baghdad as a linguistic, religious and cultural (in the broadest sense possible) point of origin always continued to resonate with this group of Jews. This was a dynamic relationship, changing across generations and having both a real and a symbolic dimension. Both coexisted, but until the early 1930s there were many real elements that shaped it: from Bombay, Rangoon Singapore and Shanghai middle class and elite Baghdadis went to Iraq to conduct business, visit close and distant relatives, chose rabbis and brides. In return, news about the Jewish communities of Baghdad, Mosul and Basra flowed to Bombay, Rangoon, Singapore and Shanghai. With the political changes that Iraq underwent in the 1930s, and with the coming of age of new generations of Baghdadis born and raised in multiple sites in Asia, the real connections thinned, and Baghdad acquired a more symbolic dimension. It became the marker of a collective identity defined interchangeably as Sephardi, Oriental or Eastern, founded on the (sometimes only nominal) strenuous defense of religious orthodoxy. When Baghdad could realistically no longer be used as a real reference point because of the political situation there, which made life for Jews increasingly difficult, Baghdadis moved their point of origin back in time and a different geographical context to Spain/*Sefarad*, that became a new imagined homeland. When Spain too fell into the convulsions of a civil war and Fascism, Baghdadis looked for a place within a broader Sephardi sphere that led Westwards, towards Paris or—more likely for a community that had developed in the shadow of the Anglophone world—towards the UK and, increasingly so, the US and Australia.

In this article on the imagined homelands of Baghdadi Jews in South, East and Southeast Asia on the one hand, and in Europe on the other, I have integrated the well-known history of the Baghdadis' elites, whose history is better known, with that of the middle classes, whose paths have been less investigated, probably also because fewer primary sources appear to be available. I have therefore made use of some of the material available through oral history repositories and of many articles from the monthly newspaper *Israel's Messenger*. The former, and to a lesser extent also the latter, represent a way to access the life stories, and often to hear the voices and the memories, of Baghdadis in South, East and Southeast Asia, to see the influence that their Middle eastern origin and identity continued to exert

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Jews. Now They Feel Betrayed," *The New York Times*, July 24, 2021. Accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/24/world/europe/spain-jews-citizenship-reparations.html>.

on them in far-away lands and for generations, in various sites and in different ways. As for the latter, during the thirty and more years of its existence, the *Israel's Messenger* represented the mouthpiece of the Baghdadis in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Bombay, promoting and reflecting their transnational connections, a sense of collective belonging and their relations across countries and generations. Even though Baghdad itself, and more broadly Iraq, obviously stood at the center of this complex identity, other cities and lands were in time identified as real or imagined homelands, while this large group continued to live and move across the globe in the twentieth century.

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