Emotionally Dividing Baghdad: Spatial Memories of the Farhud throughout the Iraqi Jewish Diaspora

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Abstract

On 1–2 June 1941, an anti-Jewish pogrom known as the Farhud took place in Baghdad, claiming a toll of 179 Jews murdered, thousands wounded, multiple women raped, and much property looted. This article tracks the accounts of two memoirists—Jews born in Baghdad who reconstructed their experiences of the Farhud from their subjective perspective in their biographical present in London. Through these agents of memory who documented their individual and collective memories, I show that the story of the Farhud and the Jews' emigration from Iraq can be told in many different contexts. This contrasts with the many historiographic studies that deal with political aspects of the Farhud and, in this context, stirs debate among historians about the circumstances of the mass exodus of Jews from Iraq and addresses the manner in which the consciousness of the Farhud and its place in the collective memory in Israel are shaped.

Introduction

In April 1941, a pro-Nazi and anti-British military coup was staged in Iraq against the monarchic regime, ending with the appointment of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani as Prime Minister. The coup was supported by the Iraqi nationalist movement, which was influenced by Nazi ideology and sought to eradicate the British presence in Iraq. In the course of May, as British and German-supported Iraqi forces battled each other, incitement against and harassment of Jews increased as the anti-British forces portrayed them as collaborators with the British. By the end of May, the Iraqi army was defeated and the leaders of the coup fled the country. On June 1, 1941, Regent 'Abd al-Ilah returned to Baghdad and the British forces remained on the outskirts the city.

Anti-Jewish riots began that morning, after police and soldiers of the defeated army attacked a Jewish delegation returning from the reception of Regent 'Abd al-Ilah. The assaults took place in the Karkh area, on the west bank of the Tigris River, and spread to the streets and the Jewish neighborhoods on the east bank of the Tigris, in the area of Rusafa, and continued until the afternoon of the following day. The rioters murdered, raped, mutilated organs, desecrated synagogues, committed robbery, and looted large amounts of property from Jewish-owned homes and shops. The pogrom took place with the knowledge of the Regent and the British and was stopped on the afternoon of its second day, only when it spread to commercial centers outside the Jewish-populated areas. Among the rioters were soldiers, police, schoolchildren, and members of paramilitary youth movements, along with Bedouin and incited mobs.[1]

The term *Farhud* was adopted by the wider international community, as well as both Arabs and Jews, to describe these riots against the Jews. In the colloquial Iraqi vernacular, the word denotes looting and robbery[2] but does not capture the

[1] Zvi Yehuda, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Second Millennium CE* (Or Yehuda: Babylonian Heritage Center, 2013), 215-221.

[2] Salim Fattal, *An Idol in the Temple of the Israeli Academy* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 2010), 36 [in Hebrew]. The word comes from the Kurdish language and means brutal terrorism. During the reign of Nizam Pasha, the Ottoman governor of Baghdad in 1910-1911, soldiers looted shops because they had not been paid their salaries. The looting operation was called a *farhud*.

intensity of the atrocities that occurred during those two days, which also included murder and rape. It is unclear when the term was first used.[3]

On 7 June 1941, a government commission of inquiry was established to investigate the events. The panel's report, shelved at the time and published years later,[4] describes the sequence of events and the neighborhoods affected, especially the densely populated and poor quarters in the old area of Baghdad. The commission set the total number of fatalities at 110 Jews and Muslims, neither differentiating between the population groups nor explaining the circumstances of the Muslims' deaths. The Jewish community counted 179 Jews murdered, thousands wounded, women raped, and homes, synagogues, and shops looted.[5] The governmental commission traced the carnage to Nazi incitement and propaganda.

There are no precise figures on the size of the Iraqi Jewish population in 1941. On the basis of data from the 1947 census, it may be estimated that at least 70,000 Jews lived in Baghdad at the time of the riots, the vast majority lived in the old part of the city and several thousands in the new neighbourhoods built in the mid-1930s. Those who lived in the new neighbourhoods belonged to the upper and middle classes while many of their family members continued to live in the old neighbourhoods. Jews accounted for more than 10 percent of the city's population.[6]

The Farhud is an extraordinary event in the collective memory of the Jewish community in Iraq. Many studies have been written about its background, turn of events, and outcomes on the basis of archival documents, oral testimonies,

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[3] Khathem Habib, *Yahoud al-Iraq wal Muwatana al-Muntaza'a* [Iraqi Jews and the Renovation of Citizenship] (Italy: Almutawassit Books, 2015), 362. During the Farhud, the looters sang "Oh what good the Farhud brought us, we wish every day would be Farhud."

[4] The committee's report was shelved and was first published in Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, *Al-Asrar Al-Khafiya fi Harakat Al-Sana 1941 Al-Tahririya* [The Hidden Secrets in the Liberation Movement of the year 1941] (Sidon: 1964), 246-256.

[5] Abraham Hayim Twena, *Dispersion and Liberation: The Pogrom in Baghdad*, part 6 (Ramla: Geoula Synagogue Committee, 1977), 45 [in Hebrew].

[6] There were two censuses in Iraq in the first half of the twentieth century: by the British in 1919 and by the Iraqi government in 1947. According to the 1919 census, the number of Jews in Baghdad was estimated at 50,000 out of 250,000 residents. According to the 1947 census, Baghdad's population was of 666,024, of whom 531,705 were Muslims (82.3 percent), 77,542 Jews (12 percent), 35,722 Christians (5.5 percent), and 1,106 other (0.2 percent).

memoirs, and newspaper reportage from the period.[7] Many historiographical debates have turned on questions that remain of interest even today regarding the circumstances of the Farhud, its impact on relations between Jews and Arabs in Iraq, and the extent of its influence on the mass exodus of Jews from Iraq between 1950 and 1952.[8]

In this article, I intend neither to reconstruct the events of the Farhud nor to discuss the historiographical debate over the incident. My intention is to show how the story of the Farhud and the Jews' emigration from Iraq can be told in many and varied contexts by the agents of memory themselves and those in their surroundings—Jews from Baghdad who experienced the Farhud and recounted their experiences in subjective memoirs in their autobiographical present in the countries where they chose to settle after leaving Iraq. The meaning they imparted to past events in their memoirs will help us understand the extent to which these events affected the course of their lives and their perception of identity and self-consciousness.

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[7] Hayyim J. Cohen, "The Anti-Jewish Farhud in Baghdad, 1941," *Middle Eastern Studies* 3, no.1 (1966): 2-17; Elie Kedourie, "The Sack of Basra and the Farhud in Baghdad," in *Arabic Political Memoirs and Other Studies,* ed. Elie Kedourie (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1974), 283-314; Harold Paul Luks, "Iraqi Jews During World War II," *The Wiener Library Bulletin* 30 no. 43-44 (1977): 30-39; Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012), 100-141.

[8] For further discussion: Yehuda, *The Jews of Babylonia*, 211-232; Zvi Yehuda, *The Agonies of Redemption: The Expulsion of the Jews from Iraq* (Or Yehuda: Babylonian Heritage Center, 2021), 38-56 [in Hebrew]; Shmuel Moreh, "The Pogrom of June 1941 as Reflected in the Literature of Jews from Iraq in Israel," in *Hatred of Jews and the Farhud in Iraq,* eds. Shmuel Moreh and Zvi Yehuda (Or Yehuda: Babylonian Heritage Center, 1992), 187-210 [in Hebrew]; Fattal, *An Idol in the Temple,* 13-82; Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: Nationalism, Religion and Ethnicity* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003), 147-207, esp. 154-155 [in Hebrew]; Sasson Somekh, *Baghdad Yesterday* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2004) [in Hebrew]; Nissim Kazzaz, *The History of Iraqi Jews in Modern Times 1800–1974* (Tel Aviv: Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq, 2024), 313-348 [in Hebrew]; Ella Shohat, "Making the Silences Speak in the Israeli Cinema," in *Calling the Equality Bluff: Women in Israel,* eds. Barbara Swirski and Marilyn Phyllis Safir (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991); Mark R. Cohen, "Historical Memory and History in the Memoirs of Iraqi Jews," *Mikan, Journal for Hebrew Literary Studies* 11 (2012): 110-137; Ester Meir, "The Leadership of the Yishuv and the pogrom against the Jews of Baghdad," in *Hatred of Jews and the Farhud in Iraq,* eds. Shmuel Moreh and Zvi Yehuda (Or Yehuda: Babylonian Heritage Center, 1992), 139-148 [in Hebrew]; Ester Meir Glizenstein, "The Pogrom against the Jews of Baghdad, June 1-2 1941," *Pe'amim*, 8 (1981): 21-37 [in Hebrew].

Cultural scholars and geographers demonstrate a dual cultural and emotional attitude toward places by using the terms "sense of place" and "sense of placeness."[9] These terms are relevant in the current case study because of its complexity. The dual attitude toward a place—close and warm feelings coexisting with detachment and alienation—solidifies under circumstances of disaster, as we see in this case study. Research into memory shows that memories of places and situations are shaped by the immediate surroundings and social atmosphere of the places in question. It also reveals the importance of agents of memory as shapers of historical and spatial narratives.[10]

Among the dozens of memoirs written in Israel, the United States, England, Canada, the Netherlands, and Australia by authors who were born in Baghdad, I choose to present two works produced during the 1990s in London.[11] The authors are similar in terms of age, socioeconomic status, ideological perceptions, and place of residence during the Farhud; they differ in their gender, the time and circumstances of their emigration from Iraq, their goals, and the language they used in their writing. I focus on writers residing in London mainly to create a distance from the influence of the Israeli discourse and the linkage between the Farhud and the Holocaust. Moreover, neither of the two writers chose to immigrate to Israel, even though members of their families had settled there.

The first memoirist is the poet Meer Basri (1911-2006), who was also the last head of the Jewish community in Iraq. He left Iraq in 1974 and spent four months in

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[9] Yi-Fu Tuan, "Place: An Experiential Perspective," *Geographical Review* 65, no. 2 (1975): 151-165; David Seamon and Jacob Sowers, "Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph," in *Key Texts in Human Geography*, eds. Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, and Gill Valentine (London: Sage, 2008), 43-51.

[10] Aviad Moreno and Haim Bitton, "The Moroccan 'Yizkor Book': Holocaust Memory, Intra-Jewish Marginalization and Communal Empowerment in Israel," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 23, no. 2 (2023): 261-283; Kobi Peled, "The Theatre of Memory: Direct Speech in Palestinian Oral History," *Memory Studies* 13, no. 4 (2020): 633-648; Kobi Peled, "The Witness and the Archive: Between Two Memory Cultures—The Discourse between Written Testimonies from Zionist & Israeli Archives and Palestinian Oral Testimonies," in *Testimonianze e Testimoni nella Storia del Tempo Presente*, ed. Gabriella Gribaudi (Florence: Editpress, 2020): 111-122.

[11] Meer S. Basri, *Life's Journey from the Banks of the Tigris to the Valley of the Thames: Reminiscences and Thoughts* (Jerusalem: Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq, 1992) [Arabic]; Violet Shamash, *Memories of Eden: A Journey through Jewish Baghdad* (Surrey: Forum Books Ltd, 2008).

the Netherlands before arriving in London. He published his memoirs in Arabic in 1992 at the age of eighty-one. The second memoirist is Violet Shamash (1912-2006), who left Iraq several months after the Farhud for India, then to Mandatory Palestine — or the Land of Israel (as she called it), and on to Cyprus, finally settling in London in 1965. She began writing her memoirs in the 1990s and continued doing so for twenty years. Her book-length memoir was published in English posthumously in 2008.

The findings of my research show that the two authors described their reconstructed experiences in the Farhud differently, despite their similarities and the similar space in which they experienced the Farhud. The reasons for this trace mainly to their perception of their own place in the environment and to the goals and target readerships of their memoirs. In this article, I do not focus on gender differences in the memoirists' writing styles. If that were my purpose, I would have to examine more memoirs by Baghdadi immigrants of both sexes who recounted the Farhud and reference the theoretical literature on women's writing, including that of women who were at the heart of wars and violent conflicts. A future study comparing the memoirs of Jews from Iraq who emigrated to different places and comparing their works diachronically and synchronously would yield a multiplicity of contexts in which the experience of the Farhud is described, not limited to the historiographical discourse that typifies the published literature on the Farhud thus far.

Meer Basri's and Violet Shamash's Autobiographical Present in London

The process of remembering, says the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, is collective in nature. Individuals reconstruct their past within the social group that they inhabit in the present.[12] Accordingly, this article examines the way the writers retrace the events of the Farhud from their subjective perspective in the present. To achieve this, I describe the autobiographical-present analyses offered by Violet Shamash and Meer Basri from their place in London and investigate their attitude

[12] Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 12-125.

toward Iraq, the country in which they were born and were forced to leave, before I analyze the way they reconstructed the Farhud events in their memoirs.

Meer Basri's book opens with a biblical quotation—"Love your neighbor as yourself"[13]—and a poetic quotation from Ibn al-Arabi, a Muslim philosopher and mystic (1165-1240 CE): "Love is my religion and faith."[14] These quotes represent Basri's universal worldview, in which all human beings are seen as equal, without barriers and cultural differentiations: "I believed in man, just as I believed in God, and I lived in brotherhood with members of all other religions and sects. For me, there is no difference between the believer and the atheist—I ask only for goodness, love and justice for them."[15]

Basri's book is written mostly as a bildungsroman that introduces us to his personal development and the construction of his identity as a poet, a scholar, and a broad-minded, cultured, and humanistic man. To this end, he integrates his poetry into his memoirs and often describes his close relations and cultural encounters with intellectuals, writers, poets, and journalists of all ethnicities in Iraq and elaborates on his travels around the world as a representative of the Iraqi government.

The memoirist admits to no tension between the particular and the universal, between being Jewish and being a man of the world: "I grew up in an open atmosphere, adhering to moral values, religious but not fanatic. Since my youth I have acquired knowledge from French free-thinkers. [...] I read the world's most important books in Arabic, Hebrew, French and English, and I have broadened my horizons and thought."[16] The particular and the universal exist cohesively in his being: "I lived within my heart the cries of the prophets, the wisdom of philosophers, the poetry of poets, and the experience of scientists."[17]

From his base in London, Basri continually affirms his affiliation with Iraq and emphasizes his roots there by describing a family history that goes ten generations back and the collective history of a Jewish community 2500 years old.[18] He retains his affinity for Iraq and establishes continuity with the world from which he came

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[13] Leviticus 19:18.

[14] Basri, *Life's Journey,* translated from the Arabic (all translations from Arabic are by the author).

[15] Ibid., 226.

[16] Ibid., 169.

[17] Ibid., 227.

[18] Ibid.

by renewing his ties with hundreds of Jewish and non-Jewish friends who settled in London.[19] He also corresponds with friends from Iraq and meets in London with visitors from Iraq, including politicians.[20]

Despite his Iraqi connections, he looks at the country through humane lenses and opts to express his disappointment with Iraq, which he was forced to leave in 1974 due to its legitimized oppression and exploitation of its citizens: "I dreamed of a perfect state with justice at its feet and good for all."[21] On a personal level, he criticizes Iraq for leaving him destitute and stateless after "freezing my assets, my fortune [...] and depriving me of the Iraqi citizenship that my ancestors and forefathers had possessed in this land for nearly 2500 years."[22] Basri does not choose to criticize Iraq due to its treatment of him as a Jew, as seen later with Shamash. On the contrary: he tends to minimize the harm done to him over the years as a Jew, as in, for example, when he was fired from the Foreign Ministry, thrown in prison for no reason, and even when not appointed as Finance Minister.[23]

As for the mistreatment of the Jews in Iraq, Basri distinguishes between the Iraqi people, whom he calls a noble people that was sympathetic to the Jewish people, and the governments that seized power by force and arrested, murdered, and tortured the Jews after the establishment of the State of Israel.[24]

In an exchange of letters with a PLO representative in London in 1976, he describes himself as a refugee in exile from his homeland.[25] In 1982, upon receiving the British citizenship, he writes a farewell poem to Iraq, in which he criticizes the Iraq that abnegated the values of justice and fairness, and congratulates England for respecting human beings, providing its citizens with security, and upholding the values of justice and peace.[26]

Basri writes about his life in London but omits all mention of interaction with British society. Although as an economist he was interviewed extensively in Iraq

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[19] Ibid., 203.
[20] Ibid., 201-203.
[21] Ibid., 227.
[22] Ibid., 195.
[23] Ibid., 32, 91, and 139.
[24] Ibid., 207.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 204-205.

about the Iraqi economy, he never refers to Thatcher's economic policy at the time of his writing or to dispositive political factors in the country. He earns his living by writing commissioned works in English on Arab countries' economies and their corporate-labor laws. However, he also continues to write poems and history books in Arabic, sustaining his creative art in the spirit of Arab culture and expressing his connection to his erstwhile homeland.[27] It is in this light that he summarizes his mental state: "I became a speaker without a stage, a writer without readers, a poet without listeners, and a prophet without disciples."[28]

During this period, Basri is active in international organizations that concern themselves with Jews from Arab countries and tries to promote an international solution to the Middle East conflict through the idea of population exchange. To this end, he sends letters on this matter to world leaders, his friends in the Arab world, and leading personalities in the UK and Israel, and maintains contact with a PLO representative in London. His efforts bear no fruit.[29]

Violet Shamash's memoir focuses on the journey of her life and that of her family through Jewish Baghdad, which the author remembers in the manner expressed in the title of the book, *Memories of Eden*. This journey ended for her with the eruption of the Farhud, which prompted her to leave Iraq in November 1941, five months after the pogrom.[30] When her sister Naima, the last member of her family to emigrate, leaves Iraq in 1970, she pens her final words to her homeland: "Goodbye Baghdad, Farewell Babylon. Adieu Eden."[31]

Shamash does not write in her memoirs about the wanderings she experienced for almost twenty-five years between India, Mandatory Palestine and Cyprus—where she and her family received British citizenship[32]—until she finally settled in London in 1965. Only at the end of her book, in the form of a message to her children and grandchildren,[33] does she briefly refer to having been in London for more than forty years, noting that her adjustment to the city was rapid:

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[27] Ibid., 195-198.
[28] Ibid., 195.
[29] Ibid., 206-211.
[30] Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 211.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Correspondence with her daughter Mira, June 27, 2024.
[33] Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 223-226.

> On the one hand, many of our community had settled here and we soon started the Gardenia Club,[34] a social place where we could meet, play a game of cards or backgammon, gossip, talk about the old days, sing some old songs, and have a traditional dinner. On the other hand, London provided an anonymity that had been unimaginable before.[35]

Therefore, Shamash not only rebuilds her home in London but also creates continuity between it and her life in Iraq, which ended in 1941. Thus, for her and for Iraqi Jews from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, the Gardenia Club is a kind of social-community framework that revives their old lives in their host country.

Shamash's circle of friends consists of two groups: "Our Community," [36] composed of Iraqi Jews living in London, and "non-Iraqis," her partners at bridge, regardless of their origin and religion. When her "non-Iraqi" friends ask her where she came from, she squirms as she answers due to her hybrid identity. The reaction of friends to her convoluted explanations astonishes her: "'Oh, you're a foreigner?' they would say, as if that explained everything."[37]

Therefore, when later asked about her origins, she replies "I am a foreigner" with no further elaboration in order to avoid complicated clarifications about her identity. After forty years in London, with the aging of Iraqi Jewish immigrants "who remembered and missed the old Baghdad," their ties loosen and the Gardenia Club closes.[38]

By calling on the cultural theory developed by the British anthropologist Mary Douglas,[39] I may argue that Shamash spent her years in London in an Iraqi-Jewish

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[34] "The Cellar Club," *The Scribe* 74 (2001), https://www.dangoor.com/74065.html (accessed June 25, 2025). The Gardenia Club was founded in January 1970 by Sir Naim Dangoor with forty members.

[35] Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 25.

[36] Shamash does not specify whom she means by "our community." Is it the Jewish community or the Iraqi community in London? In Iraq, she lived amid the Jewish upper class. Therefore, I assume that she is referring to the community of immigrants of the Iraqi Jewish upper class.

[37] Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 225.

[38] Ibid. According to correspondence with David Dangoor on April 30, 2024, the Gardenia Club closed on February 24, 2005.

[39] Mary Douglas, *A History of Grid and Group Cultural Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2006).

émigré community "enclave" whose existence depended on its members' remaining there and not being drawn to assimilation into the "central community"—the new society in England. According to Shamash, the Iraqi-Jewish émigré community in London aged and did not maintain its continuity because its future generations showed no interest in the culture of the past, which the émigrés tried to preserve through their meetings at the Gardenia. Accordingly, the "enclave" crumbled, as Shamash attests: "One by one, all remaining links to our old life are vanishing."[40]

Iraq— "the world that was and is no more"—is the central axis of both memoirs, on which the authors express their belonging and connection and create harmony between their Jewish and Iraqi affiliations. Many members of their families emigrated to Israel but both writers chose to base themselves in London. The narrative line of their writing describes the rupture and disintegration of their old world and the way they try to create continuity with their past in present-day London.[41]

For Basri, an admirer of the era of monarchical rule, the rift is reflected in the loss of Iraqi values that occurred when the dictators took over in the wake of revolutions and replaced human rights with oppression and exploitation. For Shamash, the rift began with the Farhud due to the mistreatment of the Jews and continued with the physical erasure of what Baghdad used to mean for her.

Basri seems to have succeeded in creating a new life for himself in England, even if during his first period in London he had to engage in commissioned writing and translation to support his family. Later, over the years, he describes traveling with his family around the world as evidence of his return to the good life to which he was accustomed. He recounts his life by looking at it through optimistic glasses: "I can say that my life was and still is beautiful, deep and full with many ways and paths."[42] Although he established his life in London, he writes his memoirs in Arabic, intending not to give meaning to his loss but rather to influence the way his life will be immortalized in the consciousness of readers and future generations

[40] Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 225.

[41] Based on an analysis of the subject by the historian Guy Miron regarding memoirs of German Jews: Guy Miron, *German Jews in Israel: Memories and Past Images* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004), 168-205 [in Hebrew].

[42] Basri, *Life's Journey,* 226-227.

in Iraq—a liberal who believed in every human being and someone who was seen as an educated and a ground-breaking poet.

For Shamash, her Baghdad no longer exists and the closure of the Gardenia Club signals that her life, like the lives of the other adults in the Jewish community, has come to a halt. She ends her book, however, by expressing the hope of building a new world in lieu of the one that has been destroyed: "It was my Baghdad, my native land where I grew up. Now it has been replaced almost altogether. Ninety percent of it has been erased like chalk on a blackboard and a new story is written."[43]

Therefore, Shamash, unlike Basri, infuses meaning into her writing about the loss of the world that was. She writes her memoirs in English for her children, who, unlike her, have integrated into the new society, and also for her grandchildren who cannot speak "our Arabic"[44] so that they will know who they really are and be aware of their roots.[45]

The Farhud in the Memoirs of Violet Shamash and Meer Basri

The Significance of the Farhud and the Extent of Its Influence on the Writers

Basri's and Shamash's roles as memoirists, described above, influence not only the content of their writing but also the meanings they try to impart in reference to the Farhud events that both experienced. By examining these meanings, I may clarify the extent to which these events affected the course of their lives and their perception of self-identity and self-consciousness[46].

The chapter on the Farhud appears in the first quarter of Meer Basri's memoir[47] as part of a continuous chronological account of his life's journey that began in Baghdad and continued in London. He places strong emphasis on his own actions as the factors that influenced and shaped his life and marginalizes the impact of

[43] Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 223.
[44] Ibid., 225.
[45] Ibid., 226.
[46] Miron, *German Jews in Israel*, 36.
[47] Basri, *Life's Journey,* 59.

external circumstances. In his writings, it is clear that the Farhud neither left an impression on him nor changed his perception and the course of his life. Titling the chapter "Sad Events," Basri describes the riots but does not use the nominative *Farhud* in association with them. He describes the sequence of events succinctly and summarizes them as a "tragic incident" during which "over two hundred Jews were killed [and] houses and commercial stores were robbed."[48] By describing the crimes thus, he reduces them to mere murder and robbery and leaves some of them out of the narrative.

Basri is not affected by the Farhud and does not perceive it as a formative event and a watershed moment in the lives of Jews in Iraq. Therefore, sketching the retrospective story of his life and that of his community, he centers on a consciousness of continuity that begins ten generations back and ends with his departure from Iraq in 1974, more than three decades after the Farhud. He also chooses to describe the days following the riots as days of joy and prosperity that manage to erase the "Sad Events":

> The United Kingdom armies flooded Iraq, businesses flourished and the economy prospered. Three of those involved in the harassment of Jews were proven guilty and hanged in Bab al-Sharqi. Thus, the events of the past month were long forgotten, and the Jews resumed trading and profiteering with great vigor, as if nothing so terrible had ever happened.

In his account of the "Sad Events," Basri also tells the story of Hajj Taher Muhammad Salim in the compassionate and painful terms that befit one of Baghdad's dignitaries, who died of heartbreak over the pogroms against the Jews.[49] Violet Shamash starts her memoir on her birthday and describes it as an "unmitigated disaster" for her parents, "a calamity" similar to the coincident sinking of the *Titanic*.[50] She concludes her book at the age of twenty-nine with her permanent separation from the country of her birth following the Farhud,[51] and adds a chapter about the departure from Iraq of her sister, the last member of

[48] Ibid., 60.
[49] Ibid., 59.
[50] Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 1.
[51] Ibid., 211.

the family to leave, in 1970.[52] Between these points in time, Shamash describes the cycle of her life in Iraq as intertwined with disasters preserved in the collective memory: just as the *Titanic* collided with an iceberg on her birthday and descended into the depths of the ocean, so was her Edenic life in Iraq shattered by the Farhud. Her memoir is characterized by an evolving narrative structure in which she describes her life, her family's life, and the Jewish community in Baghdad until the coup of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani in April 1941. This event was followed by a turning point in the attitude toward the Jews that culminated in the Farhud, which Shamash views as "the beginning of something terrible. For us, the Jews of Baghdad, it was to bring about our ultimate exile, a trauma that saw the oldest community in the diaspora virtually liquidated at a stroke."[53]

Thus Shamash, unlike Basri, places the Farhud at the center of her personal story and that of Iraqi Jewry—a formative event that changed the course of her life, that of her family, and that of the Jewish community in Iraq ten years later. She begins her memoir by stating that Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime, which she witnessed when he fell from power in 2003, was created from the ashes of the Farhud. She still trembles, she notes, when she thinks about the gravity of Iraqi Jewry's plight and is grateful to be one of the lucky survivors.

Following the Farhud, her personal confidence as a Jew was undermined and she lost hope of continuing to live in a place where manifestations of cruelty and terror against Jews were on the rise. Therefore, despite attempts by relatives to change her mind, she chose to leave Iraq together with her husband and two daughters. In this context, it should be noted that, on the one hand, the situation of insecurity and despair encouraged Iraqi Jews to leave Iraq after the Farhud, as Shamash did. On the other hand, it prompted young members of the Jewish community to mobilize for political activity with the Zionist and Communist underground in search of hope and security.[54]

To obtain an exit visa, Shamash's husband, David, who was liable to the draft at the time, faked his age. Shamash justifies this move by emphasizing the Jewish part of their complex identity: "Being Jewish, how could he possibly fight for Arab

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[52] Ibid., 222.

[53] Ibid., 187.

[54] Kazzaz, *The History of Iraqi Jews*, 349-366.

causes after the Farhud and the baiting of previous months?"[55] This statement belies the harmony of Jewish and Iraqi identity that Shamash presents in reconstructing her past. Namely, while continuing to emphasize her connection to Iraq and seeing it as her homeland, she now views Iraq as an Arab state, implying that it is no longer the state of its Jews and that, therefore, Jews should not die for it. A similar conclusion was adopted by young Jews who joined the Zionist movement after the Farhud, unlike those who supported the Communist movement. However, while Zionists saw the solution for the Jews in Israel and Communists in Iraq, Shamash spent a quarter of a century searching for a new home other than Baghdad until finally settling in London.

Unlike Basri, Shamash describes the Farhud in her memoir as a collective and personal traumatic experience that continues to influence her: "The brutality and terror of those two days of [the] Shavuot [festival] would be forever seared on our collective consciousness, and I shudder even now as I write these lines."[56]

In her book, she makes sure to detail the crimes committed during the Farhud, which she discovered by reading research studies: murder, rape, amputation, ripping open the bellies of pregnant women, arson, and looting. Therefore, she explains that the term *Farhud,* attributed to the pogroms, fails to reflect what really happened, and labels the events in the singular as a "pogrom."[57] By doing so, she borrows a term clearly identified with the Jewish-European space and imposes it on the urban space of Baghdad, where the Farhud took place.[58]

The Experienced Space

Violet Shamash and Meer Basri, born before World War I, affirm their belonging to Baghdad, where they were born, and describe this affiliation by reporting their

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[55] Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 213.

[56] Ibid., 208.

[57] Ibid., 199.

[58] See, in this context, the historian Aviad Moreno's reference to the crystallization of a semantic field, such as the use of the word *pogrom,* that charges the academic and public discourse in Israel on Jewish immigration in the Middle East with a sweeping meaning of injustices and hostile relations between Jews and Arabs, without analyzing the circumstances and historical context in which the concepts were created. Aviad Moreno, "Elimination, Displacement, Emigration: The Semantics of Aliyah from Arab Countries in the Academic and Public Discourse in Israel," *Zion* 1, no. 4 (2020): 107-125.

families' lengthy history in the city. Basri was well planted in the local Arab society and surrounded by members of Jewish and non-Jewish high society who loved poetry and literature, encountering them in cultural and social circles in Baghdad and beyond. Shamash, as a woman, had fewer interactions with the surrounding Arab society, especially after her marriage. She rubbed shoulders mainly with members of the upper class of the Jewish community. The title of her book, *A Journey through Jewish Baghdad*, also attests to the connections she maintained.
At the time of the Farhud, both memoirists were living in Bataween, a new neighborhood built in the 1930s on farmland in the southern suburbs of Baghdad, on the east bank of the Tigris (the Rusafa area). Houses there were built in a modern European style, in contrast to the crowded Jewish neighborhoods in the old area of Baghdad. Jews shared the quarter with Christians and Muslims.[59] There is no precise estimate of the population of the new neighborhood but it appears to have numbered several thousand.[60] Basri was single at the time; he moved into the neighborhood with his family in 1937.[61] Violet and her husband David moved there in late 1940, about six months before the Farhud.[62] According to the government's investigation report, the rioters left Bataween unscathed. Basri reinforces this claim, noting that the area was not harmed thanks to the guard of the deputy commander of the police station, a Jewish person named Naji Tchachak.[63] Avraham Twena reports in his diary that he reached Bataween after 4:00 p.m. on the first day of the Farhud and saw cafés packed with Jews. By 5:30 p.m., the cafés emptied-out, after the customers learned about the atrocities done to Jews who had been taken off buses in the Bab al-Sheikh area, a Muslim neighborhood on Ghazi Street, between Bataween and the old quarters.[64]

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[59] Naim Kattan, *Farewell Babylon: Coming of Age in Jewish Baghdad* (London: Sovenir Press, 2005), 24-25.

[60] Correspondence with Nissim Kazzaz, April 1, 2024.

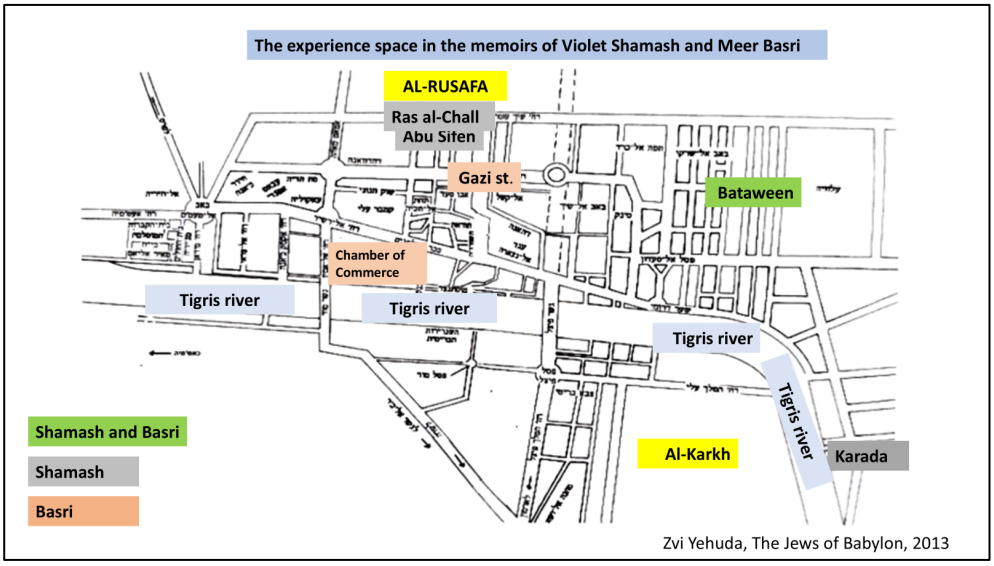
[61] Basri, *Life's Journey,* 10.

[62] Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 196.

[63] Basri, *Life's Journey,* 59.

[64] Twena, *Dispersion and Liberation,* 21. According to Professor of Modern Arab Literature Sasson Somekh, who also lived in Betaween during the riots, the neighborhood was not harmed. He describes standing behind the curtain of his home and witnessing Bedouin carrying the loot after having "robbed the Jewish neighborhoods and took [the loot] to the dilapidated shacks where they lived." Somekh, *Baghdad Yesterday,* 104.

Basri anchors his memories of the Farhud in four locations within the urban space of Baghdad, all on the eastern bank of the Tigris in the Rusafa area. The first is the Bataween, where he lived. The second location is on the way to his workplace, its exact place not specified. The third location is his workplace, the Chamber of Commerce, near the main street, Al-Rashid, parallel to the Tigris. The fourth location is on Ghazi Street, where he did not stay during the riots; this street connects the new neighborhoods to the old ones. In addition, Basri notes that the British forces stopped on the outskirts of the city; in this case he does not mention the exact location. He does not elaborate on the riots that took place in the Jewish neighborhoods. Therefore, part of his mental map of Baghdad is blackened.
Shamash anchors her memories of the Farhud in her neighborhood of Bataween—at home and in its public spaces—and in areas where she did not experience the Farhud, such as the commercial center of Baghdad (she offers no exact description of the place), in her parents' home, the Karada neighborhood, and the Jewish neighborhoods of the old area. Therefore, Shamash's mental map of Baghdad highlights many areas in the Rusafa region, unlike Basri.



Spatial Description of the Riot

Basri distances the riots from the Bataween neighborhood, where he lives, by noting that no incidents took place there and by reporting having heard gunfire and cries for help coming from a distant location that he does not specify.[65] This description, relating to the evening of the first day of the pogroms, is told in a distant and emotionless manner even when it turns out in retrospect that Jews were actually murdered there.

Basri's personal experience of the Farhud takes place only on the second day of the riots, outside his neighborhood—on his way to work at the Chamber of Commerce.[66] He does not specify the distance from his home to the bureau or whether he walked or drove there, instead focusing on describing the people he met on his way to work that day: "On the way, I saw the mob carrying stolen property. One of them looked at me with eyes wide open as I was passing through a narrow alley. I quietly returned a similar look to him. Then I thought, had I trembled in front of him, he would have concluded that I was Jewish, and would have injured or killed me."[67]

Basri describes a threatening public space for Jews, where he must pretend to be Muslim to preserve life and limb. In the same breath, however, he reports his encounter with the mob with equanimity, without criticizing what one would expect him to criticize not only as a Jew but as an Iraqi patriot and a humanist who believes in equality among all citizens.

When he arrived at work, Basri reports, "I was sitting in my office [and] the Muslim officials and the janitors said, 'Why did you come today, don't you know that security is undermined and that robberies and murders are taking place?' I went home accompanied by a policeman."[68] He adds that his brother, who worked for the Finance Ministry, and the other Jewish officials were taken home in armed police cars in the evening.[69]

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[65] Basri, *Life's Journey,* 50-61.

[66] The Iraqi authorities approved only Passover, Rosh Hashana, and Sukkot as official Jewish holidays on which employees in the public sector were allowed to absent themselves from work.

[67] Basri, *Life's Journey,* 60.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

Basri's Muslim colleagues reflect what he was unaware of: the public sphere has undergone a change in the past twenty-four hours and has become dangerous for Jews. Here, too, he describes his conversation with his friends with equanimity and does not express criticism or resentment that he, as a Jew, must be confined to his home and absent himself from work, unlike his Muslim colleagues. That he, his brother, and the other Jewish bureaucrats return home by police escort highlights the extent to which the public sphere has changed and become unsafe for Jews.

He also adds Ghazi Street, which is located outside his neighborhood and workplace, to his memorial space for the Farhud. He does so not to commemorate the crimes committed against Jews who were dragged out of their cars on the afternoon of the first day of the riots, but rather to express appreciation along with sadness toward Sheikh Taher Muhammad Salim, who died of heartbreak due to the attacks on Jews, and to criticize the policemen who withheld their assistance from the Jews.[70]

Basri, whose worldview is humane and universal, reconstructs the experienced space of Baghdad and the events of the Farhud under the influence of the moral values reflected in the biblical commandment with which he begins his memoir: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Calling on these values, he mentally divides the people in the Baghdad area into two groups according to their attitude toward the Jews during the riots: humane people who fiercely defended their Jewish neighbors and the mobs, supported by police and soldiers from the defeated Iraqi army, who took over the streets of Baghdad and indulged in the evils of murder and robbery. Basri expresses closeness toward the first group, mentioning by name and lavishing praise on some of its members. A case in point is "Hajj Tahar Muhammad Salim from Baghdad, a humane man active in charitable institutions and assisting in charity and goodness projects."[71] Basri finds it important to emphasize that these were not a mere few individuals: "There were many like him who defended their Jewish neighbors courageously."[72] Basri expresses distance and even revulsion toward the second group by describing it collectively as "the mob." Nor does he mention their religious affiliation. To validate his statements,

[70] Ibid., 59.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.

Basri characterizes them on the basis of a saying by Caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib, the most important figure among the Shiites after the Prophet Muhammad: "The common people join after every croaking and do not seek the light of knowledge."[73]

In his personal experience, he also mentally divides people into two groups: those whom he considers a threat—the mob, engaging in looting and murder as a collective group; and those who cared about him, whom he calls a group of good humane people who also have a religious identity: "Muslim officials and janitors." Basri faced exclusion from the public space and was unable to work that day. However, he does not internalize the shrinking physical space and defines his spatial identity by calling on his universal worldview. Therefore, he divides his mental map between a space of rescue and compassion where there are good people and a threatening space inhabited by bad people. His feelings about these spaces range from compassion and appreciation to contempt and loathing but not fear.

Violet Shamash's description of the Farhud consists of jigsaw-puzzle pieces of personal and collective memory based on testimonies, stories told by friends, and reports from the community's archives—designed to form a complete picture for posterity, as indicated by the purpose of her writing.[74] She describes the events in the order of their occurrence and adds disturbing clues of what is to come. These premonitions help her to reconstruct the past and reveal her emotions from her contemporary perspective.

The Farhud, Shamash reports, took place mainly in her neighborhood, Bataween, where she found shelter, first in the house of her husband's family and later in the house of her Muslim neighbor. She adds to her account other spaces that experienced riots, of which she learned later from testimonies of family members,

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[73] Ibid. Based on a hadith (a report of the saying, actions or approval of the Prophet Muhammad. it is a key source of Islamic guidance, second only to the Quran) in which Ali ibn Abi Talib notes that there are three types of people: clerics, scholars who study so as not to be ignorant, and the masses. The last-mentioned mindlessly follow anyone who calls them, like a herd. This is an example of Basri's knowledge of Shi'ite writings as well. See the hadith "Ali's will to Kamil ibn ziyad," Alukah, uploaded August 14, 2014: وصية علي رضي الله عنه لكميل بن زياد (alukah.net) (accessed July 8, 2025).

[74] Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 201.

such as the Karada neighborhood southeast of Bataween and other Jewish quarters in the old part of Baghdad to the west.

In Shamash's book, we are exposed to a greater range of emotions than we are in Basri's. Shamash opts to describe her feelings in context and commensurate with the circumstances of her exposure to the events of the Farhud, and expounds on how they are influenced by various elements of her identity: an Iraqi patriot, a Jew, a woman, a married woman, and a mother.[75]

Shamash launches the chapter on the disturbances known as the Farhud by describing the curfew, the life in hiding, and the darkness to which all Iraqi Jews were subjected during the month prior to the Farhud and during the war between Iraq and Britain.[76] As a Jew who often describes the life-cycle in her memoirs and the Jewish calendar as part of the same world that no longer exists, she notes for the sake of contrast that this month, the one that precedes the Shavuot festival, should have been a month of joy, recreation, and picnics in nature.[77] She also valorizes the victory of the British forces as an act of divine redemption.[78]

On the eve of the Farhud, she describes the following feelings: "I felt very good. After a month of fearing for our lives, it was marvelous to be on my feet, savoring the fresh air and the freedom, when only such a short time ago it had seemed that we [were] doomed."[79] At the same time, however, she drops disturbing clues about future events into her accounts of joy: "But there was danger in the air, a palpable feeling that something was not quite right."[80]

The next day, the first day of Shavuot, Shamash is invited in the afternoon to celebrate the holiday at the home of her husband's family nearby. It was to be a

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75 Emma Zohar, "Feeling Communists: Communism, Emotions, and Gender in Interwar Polish Jewry," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 21, (2020): 38-56. Zohar, basing herself on Frevert, writes that "The common approach in the field of History of Emotion emphasizes the importance of processes of learning emotions. The lingual expression of certain feelings has no meaning, the meaning of emotions derives from the specific cultural-social and political circumstances in which it was expressed." Frevert Ute, "The History of Emotions," in *Handbook of Emotions*, eds. Lisa Feldman Barrett, Michael Lewis and Jeanette M. Haviland-Jones (New York: Guilford Press, 2016), 49-65.

76 Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 195.

77 Ibid., 197.

78 Ibid., 195.

79 Ibid., 196-197.

80 Ibid., 198.

festive family gathering, different from the one in the past month, when kin gathered together out of fear and a shared fate. Shamash happily accepts the invitation and goes with her husband and their eldest daughter, leaving her infant daughter at home with two caregivers and staff without hesitation. Here, too, she threads disturbing clues about future events into her walk to the family home: "We were blissfully unaware of events about to unfold."[81]

To heighten the tension, she adds that when they arrived at the house, they were horrified by the sound of exploding fireworks. As she wondered about the nature of the noise, the phone rang and on the other side was the doorman of the family's trading house. She did not hear what the guard said, but the expressions on her husband's brother Aaron's face made everyone anxious and quiet. Shamash adds that her mouth went dry, her ears were sealed, and her thoughts went to her baby daughter, the two caregivers Farridja and Malka, the teenage cook Shemtov, and the two Kurdish guards at her home. She concludes: "Something dreadful was happening, the start of the two days of Farhud,"[82] foretold by the doorman about the mob's attempt to break into the company's warehouses.

This conversation, instigated from the outside, transformed the atmosphere at home from festival joy to anxiety. Consequently, Shamash's feelings also changed, but because of her thoughts about her baby daughter, she understands what is expected of her at such a time: "In my anxiety I forced myself to think clearly and not to faint."[83]

The family decided to stick together, as they had during the month before the Farhud, and to have her husband David bring the baby to them. Shamash dramatically describes what ensued: the moment David opened the door, a car pulled up in front of him. Her husband, she notes, was preoccupied with his worries, so he did not notice that the driver's face and the car were stained with blood. It was another witness from outside who apprised them of the atrocities committed against Jews in downtown Baghdad. He advised her husband not to go outside and to find other ways to get his daughter to safety. Shamash reacts with helplessness and anger: "Safety? What safety? We were trapped!"[84]

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[81] Ibid., 199.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., 201.
[84] Ibid., 203.

Despite the feeling that the "outside" had trapped them inside the house, Shamash does not stagnate as does her husband. Instead, she sips some water to douse the fear in her voice and asks the caregiver over the phone to bring the baby without exposing her to the harsh reality: "All the time. I wanted to shout my panic. It took all my strength to convince Farridja calmly and patiently, being careful not to even hint at what was really happening lest her own panic communicate itself to the rest."[85]

Shamash also asks to bring the eldest daughter's nanny because she is afraid of leaving her alone as a woman with the male staff. Due to her stress and anxiety, she loses her sense of time: "After what seemed like a lifetime," the caregiver arrived with the baby, accompanied by the nanny.[86]

The account thus far indicates that the flow of information to the house came from the outside and caused a change in the feelings of Shamash and those inside. When the caregivers arrived, Shamash uses literary technique to reflect the emotions among those at home through the caregivers' eyes. The latter, arriving from another home, are unaware of what is unfolding; even when they leave, they remain oblivious to the dangers outside because the disturbances are taking place elsewhere. Thus, the information to which the caregivers are exposed when they enter the house changes their emotional state from not knowing to realizing that they are in existential danger: "They immediately sensed the menace all around and realised how critical the situation was."[87]

After the baby and caregivers arrive, they block the door with furniture and cover the windows with rugs. By doing so, they fortify themselves against the outside world. They also isolate themselves from all contact with the outside by refraining from using the phone for fear of wiretapping, and then they go downstairs to hide in the dark and stuffy basement. Thus, Shamash produces a cyclical description that links the Jews' current situation, in which the family lived in hiding and darkness, with that in the month preceding the Farhud.

As the babies cry in the gloom of the basement, the adults have to find a way to satisfy their needs without revealing themselves, so they turn on the radio softly,

[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

hoping that the poor light would pacify them.[88] The family's huddling in the dark basement indicates emotions associated with seclusion, suffocation, and diminishing mental and physical space.

Even though they are hiding in the lowest part of the house, the voices of women lamenting the murdered manage to penetrate the walls of the fortified building from the Jewish neighborhoods in the old area, dismaying those in the basement and elevating Shamash's sense of helplessness and frustration: "We were all sitting in the dark waiting ... for what? For our turn, for a solution? Trying to think of some safer place to hide? Wondering what to do if...?"[89] To emphasize the direness of their situation, she writes that after feeding her infant daughter, the baby went to bed like an angel as the adults endured the hardest night of their lives. The calls for help emanating from the old Jewish neighborhoods blur the boundaries between these neighborhoods and the house in Bataween, combining them into one Jewish space and a destiny shared by all.

Shamash's descriptions suggest that while she is in emotional tension between the need to exercise restraint and attentiveness to her daughters' immediate needs on the one hand, and her fears and anxiety on the other, her Baghdad, which she once depicted as paradise, is transforming before her eyes into "a city without police, a paradise for thieves and murderers."[90]

On the second day of the riots, just after dawn, Shamash and her family took refuge in the home of their Muslim neighbor, Abdel Razaq Hilmi, whom she describes as noble-hearted.[91] Other family members found shelter in another Muslim neighbor's house. Thus, the spatial experience drove the Jews from their homes and united them with other Jews in Muslim-owned houses.

The transition from a Jewish home to a Muslim one also created a change in the diarist, from fear and helplessness to a sense of security and protection. Shamash describes Hilmi's courage as he was forced to wave his two pistols and drive away the crowd—the "angry crowd"—that had gathered in front of his house. She adds another layer to her neighbors' humanity from her perspective as a mother by

[88] Ibid., 204.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid., 205.

noting that Hilmi's wife, although shocked by the situation and sheltering 150 Jews in their home, never stopped asking if she needed anything for the baby.[92]

As Iraqi soldiers took control of the rioters when the latter began looting Muslim neighborhoods, Shamash describes a change in the Jews' situation from existential threat accompanied by fear and anxiety to lack of food accompanied by hunger. Again, Shamash found a solution by sending her cook to fetch food from their home, which they later shared with the children.[93]

Like Basri, Shamash draws a distinction between the rioters who harmed Jews and the Muslim neighbors who defended them "It was a kindness that none of us will forget. Lives were in danger. But Jewish-Muslim friendship won."[94] However, unlike Basri, who characterizes the group of rioters under the collective name of a mob, she specifies who the rioters are: an organized group of policemen, soldiers, masses of Bedouin, residents of slums, and Kataib al-Shabab's youth group.[95]

In general, one would expect Basri and Shamash, who felt themselves integrated into Iraqi society and believed in Muslim–Jewish fraternity, to explain the change in attitude toward them in their memoirs. Basri presents the Farhud as an unexpected turning point: "I did not believe that such a massacre could have taken place in Baghdad in the twentieth century, since the Jews had lived in this country quietly, calmly, understandingly and in cooperation with the Muslims for many centuries."[96] He also points out that those who harmed the Jews were mobs and provides a religious explanation of their character by citing a hadith from the Caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib. Shamash provides psychological explanations for this misconduct and blames the change in attitudes toward Jews on the penetration of external ideas such as Nazism and Arab nationalism, which, she says, "spread like a contagious disease and disrupted the balance in Muslim-Jewish relations."[97] In this context, she accusatively notes the anti-Jewish incitement of the Mufti Hajj Amin Al-Husseini and Younes Bahri, leading to an atmosphere in which the Muslim majority was willing to believe anything, fanning their anger.[98]

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92 Ibid., 205-206.
93 Ibid., 207.
94 Ibid., 206.
95 Ibid.
96 Basri, *Life's Journey,* 60.
97 Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 224.
98 Ibid., 199-200.

Shamash goes so far as to point out that the official records counted large numbers of non-Jews among the victims of the Farhud, "including rioters, security men and Muslims who came to the defense of their Jewish neighbors." [99]

Shamash goes beyond describing her personal experience by integrating the information she gathered about what had taken place at the focal points of the riots in the old Jewish area, stressing the poor neighborhoods, especially Abu Sifen and Ras Al-Chall, where Jews and Muslims lived side-by-side.

She chooses to describe the crimes against Jews in the first-person plural, "we," seeing herself as part of the Jewish collective that was harmed by the pogroms: "Now we were being killed openly in the streets. Looting by the Bedouin and remnants of the army and police turned into a full-scale pogrom."[100] She also tells the story of her own parents' house in the Al-Karada neighborhood, distant from the city center. Her family was spared when the rioters were deceived into thinking it was inhabited by Muslims.

In contrast to Basri, who focused only on murder and looting during the Farhud, Shamash adds detail on torture, amputation of organs, forcible removal of Jewish passengers from buses, vandalization of Torah scrolls, and torching of synagogues, homes and shops—bringing evidence in support of her claim.[101]

Shamash also elaborates on abuse of women: raping women, including pregnant ones; ripping open their bellies; attacking homes where pretty Jewish girls were known to live; dragging girls in the street by their hair and cutting off their arms to steal their bracelets. She notes that men saved their daughters by throwing them off balconies into the arms of friends and neighbors and that some girls saved themselves by fleeing across rooftops to neighboring houses.[102]

Shamash's descriptions of violence against Jewish women, especially in the poorer neighborhoods, correspond with the historian Orit Baskin's research. Baskin expands on the subject in a paper dealing with gender aspects of the Farhud, the socioeconomic implications of the Farhud on women, the efforts of women in the community to help victims, and the difficulties the patriarchal Jewish community

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[99] Ibid., 207; Fattal, *An Idol in the Temple,* 27. Fattal states that there is no information on Muslims who died defending Jews.

[100] Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 202.

[101] Ibid., 201-202.

[102] Ibid., 202.

faced in dealing with rape victims especially, since this was taboo in 1940s Iraqi society.[103]

The British and the Farhud

The British military forces in the area were deployed at the entrances to Baghdad but did not enter the city. As a result, Basri's spatial experience omits their presence. In Shamash's mental experience, however, the British, are both present and absent.

Both memoirists point out that the British could have prevented the riots had they intervened. Basri expresses his frustration and disappointment with the British for abdicating their moral duty by standing aside and not helping the Jews: "The British army could have sent a small force to patrol the streets of Baghdad, driving the mob away without using weapons against them, and restoring security to its previous state. But the British Ambassador, [Kinahan] Cornwallis, refused to bring the army into the city."[104] At the same time, he comes to the defense of Iraqi government officials, claiming that they were helpless in the face of the governmental vacuum and were unable to prevent the riots.[105]

Shamash intensifies her account of the helplessness she and her family felt by providing a vivid description of the outbreak and duration of the Farhud itself—the lengthy wait and anxious anticipation for the British to restore order and bring about personal security.

On the eve of the Farhud, Shamash notes: "The British were back and the month of Rashid Ali was over."[106] By putting it this way, she expresses hope that with the reinstatement of British rule in Iraq, the danger to the Jews will be removed and normalcy will return. Later on, still before the Farhud, she inserts disturbing hints into her writing about what is to come and looks forward to the return of the British: "There was danger in the air. [...] There was still no sign of any British soldiers. Where were they?"[107]

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[103] Orit Bashkin, "The Farhud of Saida: The Jewish Women in the Farhud—Surviving, Reconstructing, Heroines," *The New East* 62 (2023): 141-164 [in Hebrew].

[104] Basri, *Life's Journey,* 60.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Shamash, *Memories of Eden,* 197.

[107] Ibid., 198.

On the first day of the riots, still unaware of the morning and afternoon outbursts of violence, Shamash reports hearing the sound of fireworks exploding but allays her fears: "We had assumed the British were back in control, and all looking forward to some law and order being restored to our lives."[108] At the end of that day, now aware of the riots in the public sphere through testimonies that had reached her, she expresses her frustration: "And still, there was no sign of the British as Baghdad burned."[109]

On the second day, she stops expecting the British to arrive because her Muslim neighbor has saved her and her family and Prime Minister Jamil al-Midfa'i, whom she praises for being known for his humane attitude toward the Jews, has managed to restore order and security to Baghdad in the afternoon.

Conclusion

In light of the features that Meer Basri and Violet Shamash share, one would expect their accounts of the Farhud to be similar. However, the different ways in which they experienced the sequence of events influenced the meaning that each attributes to the Farhud in their autobiographical present. It seems that their goals in writing their memoirs as well as their different readerships, worldviews, personality traits, genders, and other complex facets of their identity all have tremendous effects on their story of the Farhud. The events of the Farhud imposed themselves on Shamash and traumatized her even as she wrote her memoir. Contrastingly, both the Farhud and the exodus from their homeland did not loom in this manner on Basri, who describes himself as one who looks back on life with satisfaction and optimism.

In her book, Shamash describes a spatial experience of the diminishing, paralysis, suffocation, and seclusion of her nuclear family together with other family members inside a dark basement. This experience, both physical and mental, instills in her a communal sense of fate with all Jews living in Baghdad. This collective consciousness also makes her realize that to break free of the space that

[108] Ibid., 199.
[109] Ibid., 205.

has closed in on her as a Jew, she must leave Iraq permanently. For this reason, she begins her memoir by portraying herself as a lucky survivor of the Farhud. However, while Shamash displays a wide emotional and descriptive range reflecting in the broad and detailed account of the space, Basri is minimizing his spatial descriptions, opting to only mention places that directly involve him or those dear to him. Basri describes a spatial experience of exclusion and inability to go about routine life but frames this experience as a temporary one that leaves no mark on him. As a result, his universal worldview does not change, and he does not feel the need to leave Iraq as Shamash does.

To conclude, these differing accounts by two people from such similar backgrounds highlights the importance of memoirs as tools for understanding the meanings of historical events for those who lived through them. Furthermore, these memoirs aid our ability to gain a cumulative understanding of the impact of historical events on the collective memory, complementing historical analysis.

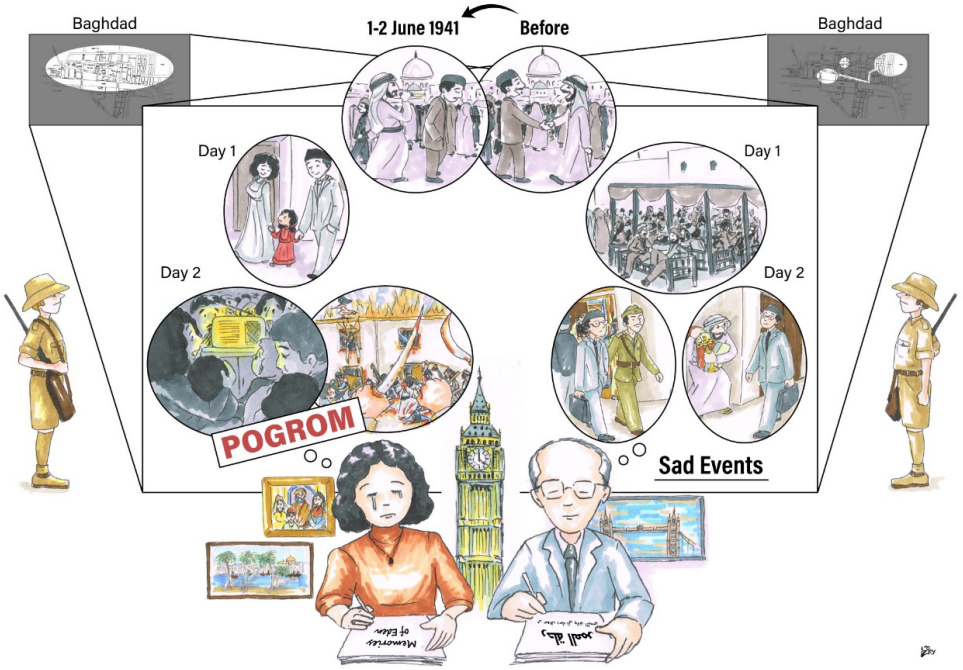

Fig. 1. Illustration by Zohar Gannot, 2025.

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Keywords: Farhud, Iraqi Jewish Memoirs, Collective Memory, Personal Narrative, Emotional Ties to Place

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