

AAARGH REPRINTS

How the Jews left Baghdad

By David Hirst, excerpts from his book: *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, 1977, London, Futura Publications, 367 p.

It was the last day of Passover, April 1950. In Baghdad, the Jews had spent it strolling along the banks of the Tigris in celebration of the Sea Song. This was an old custom of the oldest Jewish community in the world; the 130,000 Jews of Iraq attributed their origins to Nebuchadnezzar, the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile. A good 50,000 of them thronged the esplanade. By nine o'clock in the evening the crowds were thinning out. But on Abu Nawwas street young Jewish intellectuals were still gathered in the Dar al-Beida coffee-shop.

Suddenly, the convivial atmosphere was shattered by an explosion. A small bomb, hurled from a passing car, had gone off on the pavement just outside. By chance no one was hurt. But the incident shook the Jewish community, They were convinced that Iraqi extremists wanted to kill them. The fainter-hearted began to murmur 'it is better to go to Israel'. The next day there was a rush to the offices where Jews wishing to renounce their Iraqi citizenship had to present themselves for registration. Their right to emigrate had been officially acknowledged by the government on the foot of Purim a month before. Its object was to prevent emigration by illegal means. As the newspapers had explained, 'the encounters between the police and the emigrant groups showed that some Iraqi Jews do not want to live in this country. Through their fleeing they give a bad name to Iraq. Those who do not wish to live among us have no place here. Let them go.' (30) There had been little response. Police officers had appeared at synagogues and explained that all Jews had to do in order to leave Iraq peacefully was to sign the necessary form. But the Jews were afraid that this was a trap to unmask the Zionists among them; and Zionism, under Iraqi law, "was a grievous offence.

In all, about 10,000 Jews signed up to leave after the bomb; the big Ezra Daud synagogue had to be set aside as a registration office; police officers and volunteer clerks worked day and night to complete the task. A special kitchen was set up to feed them. Most of the would-be emigrants were poor, with little to lose. The panic did not last very long, however, and registration tapered off. Moreover, they were to leave by air, but only one aeroplane came to take 120 of them, via Cyprus, to Israel.

Then there was another explosion. This time it was at the US Information Centre, where many young Jews used to come and read. Again the theory was that an extremist Iraqi organization had planted the bomb, which only by chance failed to hurt anyone. Once again, therefore, there was a rush on the Ezra Daud synagogue; only this time the panic--and the number of would-be emigrants--was less than before. The year ended, and March 1951, the time-limit set for the renunciation of citizenship, was approaching.

The third time there were victims. It happened outside the Mas'uda Shemtov synagogue, which served as an assembly point for emigrants. That day in January the synagogue was full of Kurdish Jews from the

northern city of Suleimaniyyah. Outside a Jewish boy was distributing sweet meats to curious onlookers. When the bomb went off he was killed instantly and a man standing behind him was badly wounded in the eyes.

And this time there was no longer any doubt in Jews' minds: an anti-Jewish organization was plotting against them. Better to leave Iraq while there was still time. The queues lengthened outside the Ezra Daud synagogue, and on the night before the time-limit expired some were paying as much as 200 pounds to ensure that their names were on the list. A few days later the Iraqi parliament passed a law confiscating the property of all Jews who renounced their citizenship. No one was allowed to take more than 70 pounds out of the country. The planes started arriving at a rate of three or four a day. At first the emigrants were flown to Nicosia accompanied by an Iraqi police officer. But after a while even that make-believe was dropped and they went directly to Israel's Lydda airport-the police officer returning alone in the empty plane. Before long all that was left of the 130,000 abandoning home, property and an ancient heritage was a mere 5,000 souls.

It was not long before a bombshell of a different kind hit the pathetic remnants of Iraqi Jewry. They learned that the three explosions were the work not of Arab extremists, but of the very people who sought to rescue them; of a clandestine organization called 'The Movement', whose leader, 'commander of the Jewish ghettos in Iraq', had received this letter from Yigal Allon, chief of the Palmach commandos, and subsequently Foreign Minister of Israel:

Ramadan my brother.... I was very satisfied in learning that you have succeeded in starting a group and that we were able to transfer at least some of the weapons intended for you. It is depressing to think that Jews may once again be slaughtered, our girls raped, that our nation's honour may again be smirched ... should disturbances break out, you will be able to enlarge the choice of defenders and co-opt Jews who have as yet not been organized as members of the Underground. But be warned lest you do this prematurely, thereby endangering the security of your units which are, in fact, the only defence against a terrible pogrom. (31)

The astonishing truth-that the bombs which terrorized the Jewish community had been Zionist bombs-was revealed when, in the summer of 1950, an elegantly dressed man entered Uruzdi Beg, the largest general store in Baghdad. One of the salesmen, a Palestinian refugee, turned white when he saw him. He left the counter and ran out into the street, where he told two policemen: 'I recognize the face of an Israeli.' He had been a coffee-boy in Acre, and he knew Yehudah Tajjar from there. Arrested, Tajjar confessed that he was indeed an Israeli, but explained that he had come to Baghdad to marry an Iraqi Jewish girl. His revelations led to more arrests, some fifteen in all. Shalom Salih, a youngster in charge of Haganah arms caches, broke down during interrogation and took the police from synagogue to synagogue, showing them where the weapons, smuggled in since World War II, were hidden. During the trial, the prosecution charged that the accused were members of the Zionist underground. Their primary aim-to which the throwing of the three bombs had so devastatingly contributed-was to frighten the Jews into emigrating as soon as possible. Two were sentenced to death, the rest to long prison terms.

It was Tajjar himself who first broke Jewish silence about this affair. Sentenced by the Baghdad court to life imprisonment, he was released after ten years and found his way to Israel. On 29 May 1966 the campaigning weekly magazine Ha'olam Hazeh published an account of the emigration of Iraqi Jews based on Tajjar's testimony. Then on 9 November 1972, the Black Panther magazine, militant voice of Israel's Oriental Jews, published the full story. The Black Panther account includes the testimony of two Israeli citizens who were in Baghdad at the time. The first, Kaduri Salim is 49 but looks 60. He is thin, almost hunch-backed, creased-face and with glass-eye: he lost his right eye at the door of the Mas'uda Shemtov synagogue. He recounts: 'I was standing there beside the synagogue door. I had already waived my Iraqi

citizenship, and wanted to know what was new. Suddenly, I heard a sound like a gun report. Then a terrible noise. I felt a blow, as if a wall had fallen on me. Everything went black around me. I felt something cold running down my cheek, I touched it-it was blood. The right eye. I closed my left eye and didn't see a thing. The doctor told me: 'It's better to take it out.'

He remained in Iraq for three months after leaving the hospital. Then his turn to leave for Israel arrived. The ex-clerk was sent to an immigration camp. Since then, all his efforts to receive compensations have been in vain. He claimed: 'I was hurt by the bomb. The Court of Law established that the bomb was thrown by "The Movement". The Israel Government has to give me compensations.' But the Israel Government does not recognize its responsibility for the Baghdad bombs and, anyhow, cannot recognize him as hurt in action. 'I am ready to be a victim for the State,' he said, 'but when the situation at home is bad, when my wife wants money and there isn't any, what is the self-sacrifice and goodwill worth?'

The second witness was an Iraqi lawyer, living in Tel Aviv. He told the Black Panther that

After the first bomb was thrown at the Dar al-Bayda coffee-house, many rumours started running around about the responsible being communists. But the day after the explosion, at 4:00 am, leaflets were already being distributed amongst the first worshippers at the synagogue. The leaflets warned of the dangers revealed by the throwing of the bomb and recommended the people to come to Israel.

Someone who saw in it something strange was Salman al-Bayyati, Investigating judge for South Baghdad. He declared that the distribution of the leaflet at such in early hour showed prior knowledge of the bombing. He therefore instructed the police to investigate in this direction, determining at the same time that those who threw the bomb were Jews trying to quicken the emigration. Indeed, two youngsters were arrested.

Unexpectedly, the Ministry of Justice intervened. The two boys were set free. The case passed over to the hands of the Investigating Judge Kamal Shahin, from North Baghdad. In other words, at this stage, there was still a willingness not to see. For the whole emigration movement came as results of a willingness not to see-or perhaps even of a more active agreement between the Government, the Court and the Zionist representatives.

But after two more bombs and after the arrest of the Israeli envoy-it was too much. The police started acting, and it was impossible to stop the wheels. There is only one more thing to add: in the objective conditions of the issue, the trial was made according to international law. The evidence was just such that it wasn't difficult at all to pronounce such sentences. (32)

When Bengurion made his impassioned pleas for immigrants to people the new-born State of Israel he was addressing 'European' Jews (from both the New and the Old Worlds) in particular. Not only had European Jewry fathered Zionism, it was the main source of that high-quality manpower, armed with the technical skills, the social and cultural attitudes which Israel needed. But with the Holocaust over, the source was tending to dry up. So the Zionists decided that 'Oriental' Jewry must be 'ingathered' as well. It is often forgotten that the 'safeguard' clause of the Balfour Declaration-'it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country'-was designed to cover Diaspora Jews as well as native Arabs. But the uprooting of a million 'Oriental' Jews showed that, for the Zionists, it was a clause to be ignored in both its parts. Every-where they applied the same essential techniques, but nowhere, perhaps, with such thoroughness as they did in Iraq. 'Cruel Zionism', someone called it. (33)

If Zionism, as a historical phenomenon, was a reaction to anti-Semitism, it follows that, in certain circumstances, the Zionists had an interest in provoking the very disease which, ultimately, they hoped to cure. Herzl himself was the first to note the usefulness of anti-Semitism as an incentive to Jewish immigration. 'Anti-Semitism has grown and continues to grow-and so do I.' (34) There were dedicated Zionists who considered that it was the duty of the Rabbinate, Jewish nationalists and community leaders to keep the prejudice alive. (35) In the early fifties the need for immigrants was such that a columnist in Davar, influential voice of the Israel trade union movement, wrote:

I shall not be ashamed to confess that if I had the power, as I have the will, I would select a score of efficient young men-intelligent, decent, devoted to our ideal and burning with the desire to help redeem Jews-and I would send them to the countries where Jews are absorbed in sinful self-satisfaction. The task of these young men would be to disguise themselves as non-Jews, and plague Jews with anti-Semitic slogans such as 'Bloody Jew', 'Jews go to Palestine' and similar intimacies. I can vouch that the results in terms of a considerable immigration to Israel from these countries would be ten thousand times larger than the results brought by thousands of emissaries who have been preaching for decades to deaf ears. (36)

Zionism had much less appeal to Oriental than it did to European Jews. In the pre-State period only 10.4 per cent of Jewish immigrants came from 'Africa and Asia'. (37) In their vast majority, the Oriental Jews were actually Arab Jews, and the reason for their indifference was simply that, historically, they had not suffered anything like the persecution and discrimination of their brethren in European Christendom. Prejudice did exist, but their lives were on the whole comfortable, and their roots were deep. They were nowhere more at home than in Iraq, and a government official conceded --tongue in cheek-- that their Mesopotamian pedigree was much superior to that of the Moslem majority:

Many of us consider the Jews to be the original inhabitants of this country. We believe, according to the Koran, they are descendants of Abraham and that goes back nearly 4,000 years, Compared to them, therefore, we Muslims are interlopers because we have been here only about 1,500 years. (38)

At one time, Baghdad numbered more Jewish than Arab residents. In this century, as an already prosperous, educated community, they were particularly well placed to benefit from the rapid development and modernization of the country. They controlled many national institutions, most of the banks and big shops. The poorest Jews were better off than the average Iraqi. (39) Under the constitution, the Jews enjoyed equality with other citizens. They were represented in parliament, worked in the civil service, and from 1920 to 1925 a Jew was Minister of Finance.

On the rare occasions in Arab history when Moslems --or Christians, for that matter-- turned against the Jews in their midst, it was not anti-Semitism, in its traditional European sense, that drove them, but fanaticism bred of a not unjustified resentment. For, like other minorities, the Jews had a tendency to associate themselves with, indeed to profit from, what the majority, regarded as an alien and oppressive rule. In recent times, this meant that from Iraq to Morocco the local Jewish communities found varying degrees of special favour with the French or British masters of the Arab world. If Arab Jews must themselves take some of the blame for the prejudice which this behaviour generated against them, they deserve much less blame for that other cause of Arab hostility-Zionism-which was ultimately to prove infinitely more disruptive of their lives.

Zionist activities in Iraq and other Arab countries date from the beginning of the century. They were barely noticed at first. There was actually a time, in the early twenties, when the Iraqi government granted the local Zionist society an official licence, and even when the licence was not renewed, it continued to function, unofficially, for several years. At first it was the British, rather than local Jews,

who bore the brunt of Arab animosity. In 1928, there were riots when the British Zionist Sir Alfred Mond visited Baghdad. The following year demonstrations in mosques and streets, a two-minute silence in Parliament, black-edged newspapers and telegrams to London marked 'Iraqi disapproval of the pro-Jewish policy of Great Britain'. (40) It was not until the mid-thirties, when the troubles of Palestine were reverberating round the world, that Arab Jews began to excite suspicion and resentment. In Iraq these emotions came to a head in 1941 when, in a two-day rampage, the mob killed some 170 to 180 Jews and injured several hundred more. (41) It was terrible. But it was the first pogrom in Iraqi history. Moreover, it occurred at a time of political chaos; the short-lived pro-Nazi revolt of Rashid Ali Kailani was collapsing, and most members of his administration had taken flight as a British expeditionary force arrived at the gates of the city.

There was no more such violence. On account of this, and their economic prosperity, the Jews felt a renewed sense of security." Nevertheless, the Zionists were still active in their midst. In the mid-forties, they disseminated booklets entitled 'Don't Buy from the Moslems'. However, they did not have the field to themselves. Left-wing Jews, who considered themselves 'Jewish and Arab at the same time', set up the League for Combating Zionism. (43)

By the end of Israel's 'War of Independence', there were still 130,000 Jews in Iraq. The Movement organized the 'Persian underground railway' to smuggle Jews to Israel via Iran. There were occasional clashes between the police and the caravan guides. It was these which prompted the government to legalize Jewish emigration. But, whether by legal or illegal means, very few actually left. As the Chief Rabbi of Iraq, Sassoon Khedduri explained a few years later:

The Jews --and the Muslims-- in Iraq just took it for granted that Judaism is a religion and Iraqi Jews are Iraqis. The Palestine problem was remote and there was no question about the Jews of Iraq following the Arab position ... (44)

But Ben-Gurion and the Zionists would not give in so easily. Israel desperately needed manpower. Iraqi Jews must be 'in-gathered'. As Khedduri recalled:

By mid-1949 the big propaganda guns were already going off in the United States. American dollars were going to save the Iraqi Jews--whether Iraqi Jews needed saving or not. There were daily 'pogroms'--in the New York Times and under datelines which few noticed were from Tel Aviv. Why didn't someone come to see us instead of negotiating with Israel to take in Iraqi Jews? Why didn't someone point out that the solid, responsible leadership of Iraqi Jews believed this to be their country --in good times and bad-- and we were convinced the trouble would pass. (45)

But it did not. Neither the Iraqi Jews themselves, nor the government of what, by Western standards, was still a backward country, could cope with the kind of pressures the Zionists brought to bear:

Zionist agents began to appear in Iraq--among the youth playing on a general uneasiness and indicating that American Jews were putting up large amounts of money to take them to Israel, where everything would be in apple pie order. The emigration of children began to tear at the loyalties of families and as the adults in a family reluctantly decided to follow their children, the stress and strain of loyalties spread to brothers and sisters.

Then a new technique was developed:

Instead of the quiet individualized emigration, there began to appear public demands to legalize the emigration of Jews-en masse ... in the United States the 'pogroms' were already underway and the Iraqi

government was being accused of holding the Jews against their will ... campaigning among Jews increased... The government was whip-sawed ... accused of pogroms and violent action against Jews... But if the government attempted to suppress Zionist agitation attempting to stampede the Iraqi Jews, it was again accused of discriminations. (46)

Finally there came the bombs.

'Ingathered' for what? The Iraqi Jews soon learned; those of them, that is, who actually went to Israel, or, having gone, remained there. For by no means all of uprooted Oriental Jewry did so. A great many of them --particularly the ones with money, connections, education and initiative-- succeeded in making their way to Europe or America. But what the irretrievably 'ingathered' learned was the cruellest and most enduring irony of all: Oriental Jewry was no more than despised cannon-fodder for the European creed of Zionism.

What did you do, Bengurion?
You smuggled in all of us!
Because of the past, we waived our citizenship
And came to Israel.
Would that we had come riding on a donkey and we
Hadn't arrived here yet!
Woe, what a black hour it was!
To hell with the plane that brought us here! (47)

This was the song which the Iraqi Jews used to sing. Nothing the rulers of Israel could do quelled the bitterness which the newcomers nurtured against them. They were lectured, in their transit camps, by teams of Zionist educators. But, long after they left the camps, they continued to sing that song, even at weddings and festive occasions. It remained popular throughout the fifties. Then it eventually disappeared, but it can hardly be said that nostalgia for the 'old country' disappeared with it. For the contrast between what they once were, 'in exile', and what they became, and remain, in the Promised Land is too great. One of the 'most splendid and rich communities was destroyed, its members reduced to indigents'; a community that 'ruled over most of the resources of Iraq ... was turned into a ruled group, discriminated against and oppressed in every aspect'. A community that prided itself on its scholarship subsequently produced fewer academics, in Israeli universities, than it brought with it from Iraq. A community sure of its own moral values and cultural integrity became in Israel a breeding ground 'for delinquents of all kinds'. A community which 'used to produce splendid sons could raise only "handicapped" sons in Israel'. (48)

NOTES

30. Black Panther (Hebrew journal), 9 November 1972, see Documents from Israel, Ithaca Press, London, 1975, P- 127.
31. Allon, Yigal, The Making of Israel's Army, Valentine, Mitchell and Co., London, 1970, PP. 233-4-
32. Black Panther, op. cit., PP. 130-2
33. Ibid., P. 131.
34. Herzi, The Complete Diaries, op. cit., Vol. 1, P. 7.
35. Lilienthal, Alfred, The Other Side of the Coin, Devin-Adair-, New York, p. 184.
36. Ibid., P. 47.
37. Central Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Abstract of Israel, No. 16, p. 96.
38. Berger, Elmer, Who Knows Better Must Say So, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut, P. 34.
39. Black Panther, op. cit., P. 132.

40. Longrigg, Stephen Helmsley, Iraq, 1900 to 1950, Oxford University Press, London, 1953, PP. 19-23.
41. Cohen, Hayyim, J., The Jews of the Middle East 1860-1972, John Wiley and Sons, New York and Toronto, 1973, P. 30.
42. Ibid., P. 30.
43. 'The League for Combating Zionism in Iraq', Palestine Affairs, (Arabic, monthly), Beirut, November 1972, P. 162.
44. Berger, op. cit., P. 30.
45. Ibid., p. 30.
46. Ibid., pp. 32-3.
47. Black Panther, op. cit., p. 132.
48. Ibid., p. 133.

Source: <http://www.mideastfacts.com/iraqi_jews_hirst.html>