

Violette Shamash ~ Memories Of Eden. When Baghdad Was Beautiful

Imagine a world with no running water or electricity, scorching heat and the constant fear of cholera. Imagine a warren of alleys no wider than a cart. Cows are being milked on doorsteps, street barbers are giving shaves, pulling teeth and lancing boils. Barefoot water-sellers are bent double under their heavy goatskins.

It is 1912 and we are in old Baghdad. To us it sounds like hell. Yet Violette Shamash, born into an affluent family, adored its positive side: sleeping under the stars, hearing the call of the nightingale, smelling scents of gardenias and spices, riding to school on donkey-back. For her it was a kind of Eden. Violette was a privileged witness to a time when nearly 40% of Baghdad was Jewish and Jews, Moslems and Christians embraced each other's differences. Her insights into domestic life, and a society coming to terms with the 20th century, are candid, entertaining, and often very amusing. However, in 1941, disaster struck the oldest community in the Diaspora. A brutal massacre took place over two days of rioting and sounded the death-knell for the Jews of Babylon.

This slideshow contains images from Violette's book, [*Memories of Eden*](#), which not only provides a unique insight into the culture and customs of the Jews of Iraq, but also shows everyday life as experienced by everyone at a time when Baghdadis lived together side by side, in mutual respect, irrespective of religion. William Shawcross has called it "an astonishing record, telling the story of a cultivated and well integrated Jewish community in the heart of Muslim Arabia during the end of the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate. A superb account of a long forgotten time which is barely imaginable now." Further reviews and comments from academics and literary critics can be seen on our website. We would very much welcome your views and opinions via our blog: <http://memoriesofeden.wordpress.com>