

Iraqi-Jewish Oral History | Ghetto In Diwaniya, Iraq 1941: Lynette's interview With Daniel Sasson

ראיון עם דניאל ששון בעברית עם כתוביות באנגלית: הגטו בדיווניה, עיראק Jan. 15, 2020

I had the honor of interviewing Daniel Sasson about his book, "The Untold Story" (available in Hebrew). Inspired by the ghettos in Europe during the Holocaust in 1941, then Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Ali set up a Nazi-like ghetto for over 600 Jews in the small city of Diwaniya, located just outside Baghdad.

Daniel was only 5 years old, and his family was one of the most prominent Jewish families in Iraq at the time. A couple days after the ghetto's release came the 'Farhud', a pogrom in which hundreds of Jewish homes were looted and destroyed, 200 Jews murdered, thousands injured, and Jewish life in Iraq forever changed. Its 79th anniversary was a few days ago.

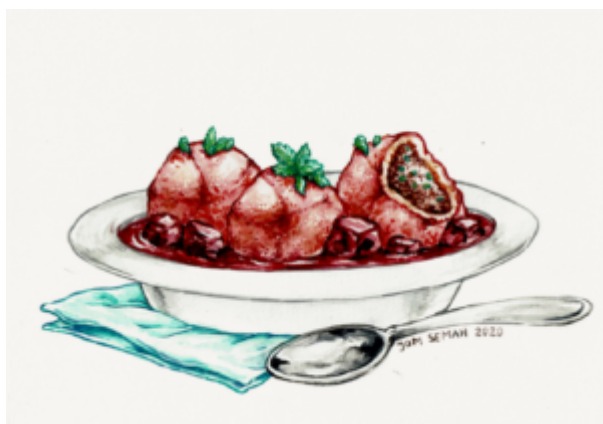
Daniel was one of my first interviewees last summer, when I was conducting interviews for my Master's thesis. I spent the entire Fall semester processing the things he and other interviewees told me- stories I couldn't get out of my head for months. I am honored to have met such a resilient person like him, and I believe that English-speaking communities have so much to gain by learning about the stories and experiences of Iraqi Jews.

(If the English translations don't come up automatically, press "CC")

היה לי כבוד להיפגש עם דניאל ששון ולדבר על הספר שלו, "הסיפור שלא סופר", על הגטו הראשון (והאחרון) בעיראק. אין לי מספיק מילים להודות לו על ההזדמנות הזאת. למדתי על ההשפעה של הנאציזם בעיראק, חיים שלו בבגדד, ומה קרה בתוך הגטו. הקהילה היהודי העיראקית חזקה מאוד, עשירה, ומלא עם סיפורים מדהימים? זה כדאי לשמוע, להבין, וללמוד מהם.

"CC" אם אין כתוביות באנגלית, לחץ על

The Art of Cooking - Kubba Shawandar



This dish reminds me of my grandmother in Israel. Whenever I visited my grandmother as a kid this was what I was looking forward to the most.

And my grandmother knew this and always made sure to fill my plate with kubba!

The smell of cooking this dish gives me a great feeling of nostalgia.

Kubba Shawandar looks more difficult to make then it is and I hope you will try it out yourself.

The ingredients are very easily obtained and the flavour is a classic Iraqi Jewish taste.

Ingredients:

For the soup:

- 3 medium sized onions
- 4 medium sized red beets (or 2 cans)
- 1 small can tomato paste
- 1 lemon
- 2 dried bay leafs
- sugar
- salt & pepper
- paprika powder
- olive oil
- 1 liter of chicken broth

Beef mixture:

lean ground beef
1 onion
salt
fresh parsley
ras el hanout
turmeric

Kubba dough:

semolina
water
salt

Making the kubba balls:

Start with mixing the beef with minced onion and minced parsley in a bowl.

Add the salt, ras el hanout and turmeric and mix well.

(make a small patty and pan fry it, taste this for salt and seasoning make sure it is not too bland)

In another bowl add 2 cups of semolina with salt and 1 cup of water mix until it is a sticky dough.

Do not over mix it and make sure it stays sticky and does not become a dry dough.

Next let's make these kubba balls. In your hand take a small ball of dough and press a hole in it with your thumb.

Add the beef mixture into the dent and start folding the rest of the dough around it.

Once the beef has been covered squeeze the ball lightly and roll it around in your hand to form it into a ball shape.

When done place it on a non-stick surface and continue making the rest, do not let them touch each other!!!

(you can be a bit rough with making these balls)

Making the soup:

In a big pot we start with caramelizing diced onions with olive oil.

When the onions become translucent add all the dry ingredients.

(bay leaves, salt, sugar & pepper, paprika powder)

Give a quick mix and when all the dry ingredients have become a single mixture add the bite size diced red beets.

Fry for a couple of minutes on low heat, when it starts to become dry add the tomato paste, chicken stock and lemon juice.

Mix well!

Wait until the soup starts simmering on low heat.

Once the soup starts simmering gently place the kubba balls we made to the soup. These solidify very quickly once they go into the soup.

Add all the balls to the soup. You can make small meatballs with any leftover meat and throw them to the soup as well.

Make sure everything is covered with liquid and simmer for 45 minutes.

Always taste for salt before serving!

Garnish with some fresh parsley.

Kubba Shawandar has a neutral taste and works well with some salad, bread or rice.

Beteavon!

Eleonore Merza ~ The Israeli Circassians: Non-Arab Arabs



Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem (2012) One day, I was at the *tahana merkazit* [central bus station] in Jerusalem with Mussa and we went through the metal detector. They let him

go through but when it was my turn, they asked for my identity card. They saw that we kept talking together so they asked for his I.D. too. He is a redhead and has blue eyes so they thought he was Ashkenazi. But they saw his name 'Musa' – that sounds quite Arabic and they asked him if he was Arab, but then his family name doesn't sound Arabic at all so he explained that he was Circassian. Then, they asked him what religion he was and he said 'Muslim'. They were dumbfounded...

The 4,500-odd Israeli Circassians, who arrived during the second half of the 20th century in what was then part of the Ottoman Empire, have an unusual identity: they are Israelis without being Jews *and* they are Muslims but aren't Palestinian Arabs (they are Caucasians). Little known by the Israeli public, the members of this inconspicuous minority often experience situations like the one reported above; indeed, many of them have a fair complexion and light-colored eyes that don't match the widely spread (and expected) clichés about Muslims' physical traits. At the same time, many Circassians – men, in particular – bear a Muslim name, which immediately causes them to be classified as “Arabs.”

Until 1948, the Zionist project's exclusive aim was the establishment of a Jewish state – not the establishment of a state where Jews could finally live far from the anti-Semitic threat. In *The Jewish State*, Theodor Herzl had already stated that “the nations in whose midst Jews live are all either covertly or openly Anti-Semitic”² and the establishment of a Jewish state was the future as Zionism saw it. In fact, when the State of Israel was declared, it was defined as the state of the Jewish people, inheritor of the Biblical land of Israel and of the kingdom of Judah. This exclusive definition has made the creation of citizenship categories quite arduous. Actually, some figures of Zionism opposed Herzl's political Zionism even before the creation of the state. One of them was Asher Hirsch Ginsberg, better known under his pen name Ahad Ha'am. Even though Ahad Ha'am received the Zionist circles' moral support, he was convinced that the future state could not ingather all the Jews and he fought Herzl's political Zionism. After his visits in Palestine, the author wrote down his impressions and criticized the functioning of settlements. In his essay *Emet me-Eretz Yisrael* [A Truth from Eretz Yisrael], he denounced the myth of the virgin land conveyed by the Zionist leaders and reminded them that their analysis did not take into account the Arabs:

From abroad, we are accustomed to believe that Eretz Israel is presently almost totally desolate, an uncultivated desert, and that anyone wishing to buy a land there can come and buy all he wants. But in truth it is not so. In the entire land, it is hard to find tillable land that is not already tilled [...] We are accustomed to believing that Arabs are all desert savages, like donkeys who do not see or understand what is going on around them. This is a serious mistake.

The complete essay: <https://journals.openedition.org/bcrfj/7250>

Référence électronique

Eleonor Merza, The Israeli Circassians: non-Arab Arabs, *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem* [En ligne], 23 | 2012, mis en ligne le 20 février 2013, Consulté le 10 juin 2020.

Eleonore Merza is a political anthropologist; she completed her doctorate at the EHESS. She is an associate researcher in the Anthropology of Organizations and Social Institutions Research Unit at the Interdisciplinary Institute for the Anthropology of Contemporary Societies (IIAC-LAIOS: CNRS-EHESS). She currently pursues post-doctoral studies at the French Research Center in Jerusalem (CRFJ). Her doctoral thesis focused on the identity of the Circassian minority in Israel and her current research deals with non-Jewish citizens, minorities, and co-existence in today's Israeli society. She taught at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) where she was a lecturer on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Träume ich von Israel



Mati Shemoelof. Ills.
Joseph Sassoon Semah

Träume ich von Israel

frag ich mich, was kann noch werden
ich will bessere Nachrichten in der Zeitung lesen
mein Arabisch aufbessern, mit ihm Frieden schließen

ich will in Gaza meine Gedichte lesen, dann in den Nahostzug steigen
in Haifa halten ('n paar Kleider und Bücher nehm ich mit)
und zur Überraschungsparty meiner Großmutter fahren
in Bagdad

Denk ich an Israel,
an ihren Beitritt in die Nahostunion,
die, wie die europäische -
Israel, was lachst Du mich aus,
Wirklichkeit zeugt doch für das unsichtbare Ringen der Träume

Ich will dahingleiten, frei in der Luft, die sich zwischen Haifa und Beirut erstreckt
will, wie die Wandervogel, ganz Europa durchwandern, Asien und Afrika,
ohne Paß, ohne Nationalität wissen sie mehr über uns,
als wir je wissen werden

unsere Konflikte und Probleme kennen sie
und kommen doch jedes Jahr aufs Neue zurück
(muß leider gerade lesen sie werden weniger)

Träume über Israel, ganz gewöhnliche,
ich phantasiiere über Möglichkeiten,
Dich neu zu dichten.

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Mati Shemoelof - *Bagdad, Haifa, Berlin*. Gedichte. Aphorisma Verlag, Berlin,
2019. ISBN 978 3 96575 076 1

Mati Shemoelof & Joseph Sassoon Semah Semah ~ How to Explain Hare Hunting To A Dead German Artist



*Joseph Sassoon Semah,
How to Explain Hare
Hunting to a Dead
German Artist, February
24, 1986. Photography:
Olaf Bergmann. Courtesy
of Joseph Sassoon Semah*

Tohu Magazine, February 6, 2019. *Joseph Sassoon Semah, a Baghdad-born artist who now lives and works in Amsterdam, is about to embark on an extensive multi-site project, in Amsterdam, Jerusalem, and Baghdad. Berlin-based poet and author Mati Shemoelof talks with him about his years living as an artist in Israel versus being a Babylonian Jew and an artist in Europe. They discuss Judaism, diaspora, exclusion, and acts of concealment and building.*

The artist Joseph Sassoon Semah has never before given an interview to an art publication in Israel. The Israeli art world has not adequately recognized his work. Although he showed in several important institutions in Israel and worked with key curators, it was negligible compared with the scope of his oeuvre,

especially following his move from Israel to Europe. What would have happened had he stayed in Israel? Was he stumped by his diasporic state or was he ahead of his time in dealing with the Jewish component of his art? It is not merely an objective issue to be measured by the number of exhibitions, but rather the artist's subjective sense of his position in the art field. I gather from Semah that he has remained on the outside, beyond the walls of Jerusalem. In Europe, too, and especially in the Netherlands, his work is not widely known yet. This interview stems from my own interest in Semah's identity (we are both of a Jewish Iraqi descent) and his work, but also as an intra-European process of an artistic, inter-generational analysis attempting to formulate the role of Jewish culture in Europe.

Semah was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1948. His grandfather, Hacham Sassoon Kadoorie, was the chief rabbi of Baghdad's Jewish community until his passing in 1971, even after they had all emigrated. In 1950, Semah and his family were uprooted from Iraq, and they moved to Israel. He grew up in Tel Aviv. Traumatized by his military service in the 1967 and 1973 wars, he chose exile and has been living in the Netherlands since 1981. The grandfather's continued residence in Baghdad, along with some 20,000 more Jews, brings to mind Semah's own position in Amsterdam (his grandfather did not immigrate to Israel, and Semah emigrated from Israel - both had chosen a diasporic existence as a Jewish minority under a Muslim/Christian majority), where he now lives with his partner, Linda Bouws. She runs the institute they co-founded, [Metropool - Studio Meritis MaKOM: International Art Projects](#). My grandmother, Rachel Kazaz, had also been among the displaced Baghdadi Jews. My acquaintance with the pain and the uprooting enabled me to write about the mysterious affair that drove the Jews of Iraq to abandon their property, their culture, and their way of life within just a year; the affair that involved bombing Jewish centers in Baghdad, including the synagogue of Semah's grandfather.[1]



Joseph Sassoon Semah, My Beloved Country - That Did Not Love Me, rug and black oil paint, 100X70 cm, 1977. Photography: Ilya Rabinovich. Courtesy of Joseph Sassoon Semah

The religious component is always present in Semah's art, in both form and content, as Judaism provides him with continual context. In some works, mostly those that look upon Israel as an object, he also addresses the Middle-Eastern identity. For instance, the work from the series *My Beloved Country - That Did Not Love Me* (1977) shows Israel as an alien white slice cut from a carpet of the Middle East. The carpet signifies an area, and also a place where Jews, Muslims, and others offer their prayers.[2] The scholar Shlomit Lir wrote in the past year: "In *My Beloved Country - That Did Not Love Me* Joseph Semah demonstrates the binary perception and the Orientalist gaze by placing an outline of the map of Israel on top of a Persian rug. The virulent contrast created by the coupling of these two elements emphasizes an act of deletion where there should have been geographical continuity. The installation points to a place of conflict and unresolved dissonance between the Middle-eastern space, represented here by the brightly embroidered rug, and Israel, represented as a uniformly white cutout in the shape of the country's map." [3]

In the early 1990s, the well-known curator Sarit Shapira identified another central theme in Semah's art - the motif of the victim. She wrote about it: "...in

his work, too, it is handled through linkage to a Biblical myth.”[4] Shapira discerns Semah’s process of reversal: rather than a discussion by the Christian culture about the place of the Jew within it, the Jew is viewing Christian society as the ‘other.’ “The production of paintings and sculpture in the West, Semah argues, is tainted by this Christian lust. His treatment of the border line between Judaism and Christianity is a maneuver that allows him to observe, from a remove, from the position of the ‘other,’ both the culture and his own Jewish-Israeli one.”[5]



*Joseph Sassoon Semah,
My Beloved Country -
That Did Not Love Me,
metal clothes hanger and
egg-shaped marble, 33
cm, 1977. Photography:
Ilya Rabinovich Courtesy
of Joseph Sassoon
Semah.*

If we looked closely at art that is being made in Israel today, we could detect the influence of Semah’s work, like the influence of other Mizrahi émigré artists such as Meir Gal, who is also mentioned by Shlomit Lir in her academic paper.[6] However, throughout his years in Israel Semah has always been considered a bird of a different feather. The few, select occasions on which he has exhibited in Israel include “Routes of Wandering” at the Israel Museum (1991), curated by

Sarit Shapira, and the Israel Festival of 1986, under the directorship of Oded Kotler, when his work, *Take Sand and its Shadow is Blue (As the Mountains Surround Jerusalem)*, was presented near *Armon HaNatziv*, the headquarters of the British high commissioner in the 1930s and 1940s, built on the what had previously been the border between Israel and Jordan. For this work, Semah installed a series of blue cocoons that marked the seam between east and west.[7]

Over the last forty years Semah has been preoccupied with identifying the strategy of the Western *Imperium*, to uncover its blank pages and through them to reveal that which is hidden, concealed – the universal Jewish narrative. His method is quite simple: he studies the canonical works of Western art by writing his interpretations of them. Sometimes, his artworks become footnotes in the text he is writing.

The 26th of November, 1965, Düsseldorf, Germany: Joseph Beuys is inside a gallery, an audience is watching him from outside. His head is smeared with honey and gold leaf, and he is holding a dead hare in his arms. He named the performance “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare.” Beuys strolled along the walls of the gallery, which were hung with his Brown Cross (Braunkreuz) paintings– crosses painted with the hare’s blood – explaining them in a language unintelligible to the hare. Beuys died on January 23, 1986. And on February 24, 1986, on his birthday, Semah put on a performance, *How to Explain Hare Hunting to a Dead German Artist* (“hare hunting” was a euphemism for killing Jews during the Holocaust). It was Jewish theological tradition’s answer to Beuys, going back in time to Esau, who had come back from the hunt with a hare (a non-kosher animal) and thus lost his father’s blessing to his brother Jacob. The image of Esau with the dead hare slung over his shoulder is featured in many paintings in major European churches.[8]

Mati Shemoelof: Have you met Beuys?

Joseph Sassoon Semah: I met him twice. Once in Berlin, at the National Gallery. He was a kind man, and he invited me to his home, but I didn’t go. We met again, also in Berlin, and talked for half an hour. Yes, he was aware of my work, but he was the clean, pure face of Germany after WWII, and myself a young artist.



An Introduction to the Principle of Relative Expression, 1979, black oil crayon on pages from the Babylonian Talmud, 27×40 cm each Courtesy of Joseph Sassoon Semah

MS: Your work reminds me of the writing of the Babylonian Talmud, in the sense that the interpretations are independent creations, and of Jewish literature, which is inter-textual and gathers in the layered writings of sages from different times. And you created a piece on the subject of the Babylonian Talmud, which was banned.

*JSS: I couldn't show *An Introduction to the Principle of Relative Expression* (1979), in which I have covered pages from the Babylonian Talmud in black paint. Moti (Mordechai) Omer, the late director of the Tel Aviv Museum, told me, in our last conversation, that he would "display these works at the Tel Aviv Museum over my dead body." The first and last to show it was the curator Gideon Ofrat, at the "Time for Art" (*zman le-omanut*) space in Tel Aviv, in 2002.*

According to Semah, Omer's reaction, from thirty years ago, was a rejection of his symbolism and a result of the difficulty to understand his context as a Babylonian Jew. In the rejected work, he covered pages from the Babylonian Talmud in black paint intersected with white lines that marked entry and exit points to and from the Talmud. The same work was shown twenty years later in an exhibition curated by Gideon Ofrat.[9] Perhaps Ofrat had understood the context and seen the work's artistic value, which seems obvious today, with the increased recognition

of the Jewish component in Israeli art. Omer was not alone in declining to show Semah's works. According to the latter, Yigal Zalmona, of the Israel Museum, and Galia Bar Or, of the Mishkan Museum of Art at Ein Harod, rejected his work as well.

In 1979, the year Semah's father died, Israel has died for him too, he says, and he had been reborn as a Babylonian Jew. From within the canonical European art, Semah has discovered that he was a guest, the 'other.' The discovery created a hidden, delicate equilibrium between the new personal identity (a Babylonian Jew), and his position in the West, that is Europe - being a universal Jew.

MS: Do the Dutch accept your artistic critique of the Holocaust discourse?



Joseph Sassoon Semah, study based on the Meir Tweig synagogue in Baghdad, Iraq, from On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) III - The Third GaLUT - Baghdad, Jerusalem, Amsterdam, pen and pencil and paper, 42X30 cm, 2018 Courtesy of Joseph Sassoon Semah

JSS: Since I started the project *On Friendship / (Collateral Damage)* with Linda Bouws, in 2015, the art world and the Dutch in general begun to comprehend the research in its entirety.

The project Semah is referring to will manifest itself this year, 2019, under a double title, comprising two subjects: "[The Third GaLUT - Baghdad , Jerusalem, Amsterdam - On Friendship / \(Collateral Damage\) III.](#)" He will reveal his full name for the first time - Joseph Sassoon Semah, the Babylonian Jew, of the third Exile (*GaLUT*). The project, created in collaboration with Linda Bouws, will be extended to Jerusalem and Baghdad as well. He will construct architectural models of the homes and synagogues and burial places of the Jews of Iraq, including his grandfather's Meir Tweig synagogue and the tomb of the prophet Ezekiel (which is located about 100 kilometers outside Baghdad). He will present these models in public and private spaces in Amsterdam. With the help of local activists, Semah is planning to build, in close proximity to the Meir Tweig synagogue, where his grandfather had served as chief rabbi, *The Doubling of the House* - a house in which the entrance and the window form the Hebrew letters for *chai* (חַי) - the letters that represent the number 18, and also mean "living." The same structure will also be raised in Amsterdam. Today there are no Jews left in Baghdad. That is, Babylonian Jewry has been erased twice - once in Iraq, and for the second time in Israel. The very construction of the house opposite the synagogue proves that the Jews of Iraq are alive and present. Unlike works like Yael Bartana's *...and Europe Will be Stunned*, here there is no repatriation of Iraqi Jews to Baghdad; there is only an anguished howl.

"To begin with, GaLUT is neither Exile, nor Diaspora, nor an existing Place; GaLUT is simply a disciplined activity, an intensive vision, and it is what GaLUT proceeds to do - to transform each and every temporary MaKOM of shelter, into a perpetual search for a Handful of Soil. At this point, one can say that the depiction of MaKOM in GaLUT is an idea of a constant doubling; A double mirror-image of itself by itself. But behind all these, there is another reality, that is of an absolute Reading, to be defined in terms of the enduring action of Writing." (Joseph Sassoon Semah, 1986)[10]

MS: *You make use of the various meanings of the Hebrew words makom(place) and galut (exile), and find in their combination the term "city of refuge," or "shelter." This term resonates the public bomb shelters, which are non-existent in*

Europe but are part and parcel of Israeli epistemology, and also resonates to a place of escape – to immigration – and the search for a city of refuge. In biblical times, the six cities of refuge were in Transjordan.

Semah: We've served in the military, in addition to other things, and its business is to kill. We kill directly and indirectly. The army is not about dancing. In 1986 I made Amsterdam my city of refuge, and there I publicly confessed my past as a soldier.



Joseph Sassoon Semah, MaKOM (The Doubling of the House), 200X200X200 cm, cement blocks, with entrance and window, 1979-2019. Photography: Ilya Rabinovich Courtesy of Joseph Sassoon Semah

The correspondence between Semah and myself is not related only to identity, Mizrahiness, ethnicity, or Jewishness – it is also about place. We both are Jews living in Europe, conducting a dialog with Israel that had defined us as subjects, and with the European continent. We have no choice but to deal with the multiple states of mind that had established the Jewish identity as we know it, without us

(Iraqi Jews in particular, and Arab-Jews in general) having ever taken part in this continuum of thought and cultural production shared by the those who established the three identities we are confronting - either the Jewish-Israeli identity, the Jewish-European, or the European one.

MS: Your criticism reaches far, as far as Martin Luther and his anti-Semitism. In 2017, you were permitted to present an intricate work in Nieuwe Kerk cathedral in Amsterdam. It contained your name, among other things, written above Luther's. It is interesting to me that you, as a Babylonian Jew, are reversing the figure of the Jew in the very heart of Christian culture, even though our ancestors come from a different culture. You assume a task of deconstruction that contains an element of masquerade.

JSS: We connected to Martin Luther in this project by way of the 500th anniversary of his achievements, but the research had been written already thirty years ago. I can explain the connection to Luther as a private investigation - going back to things I explored thirty years ago in Berlin. Let us not forget, there has been an exclusion of the Mizrahi Jews in Israel, and we hardly ever listened to Arab music or read Arab literature. Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust became our origins. The establishment and the education system erased the culture of the Babylonian Jewry. Although I had not been a part of the Mizrahi struggle, after many years in Europe, and through study, I returned to the identity I had lost in Israel.

Notes

[1] Shemoelof, Mati, "We are Writing a Nation State:- the Case of the immigration of the Jews of Iraq." See: <https://matityaho.com/2012/10/09/-אנחנו-כותבים-אותך-מולדת-המקרה-של/>

2]] Lir Shlomit, "Black Panther White Cube: The Exhibition that Wasn't Shown," *Visual culture in Israel: An anthology*, Edited by Sivan Rajuan, Noa Hazan (Shenkar College: Ramat Gan and Hakibbuz Hameuhad Publishing: Tel Aviv, 2017), p. 322.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Shapira, Sarit, *Routes of Wandering: Nomadism, Voyages and Transitions in Contemporary Israeli Art*. (Jerusalem: Israel Museum), 1991, p. 163 (in Hebrew). This quote was translated by the translator of the current essay.

[5] Ibid.

[6] See Lir. p. 322.

[7] This performance was restaged in 2007 at a church in Hildesheim, as part of a large project called *Next Year in Jerusalem*, which took place in 12 churches throughout the Hanover region in Lower Saxony, Germany.

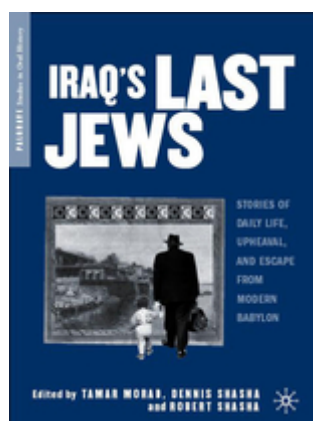
[8] See also: Gideon Ofrat, *The Return to the Shteitel* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute. 2001)

[9] See Ofrat's article about this work

[10] From the manifest Joseph Sassoon Semah wrote for his the project *City of Refuge (Epistemic MaKOM)*, created in Amsterdam in 1986.

Previously published
in <https://tohumagazine.com/article/how-explain-hare-hunting-dead-german-artist>

Tamar Morad, Dennis Shasha & Robert Shasha ~ Iraq's Last Jews: Stories Of Daily Life, Upheaval, And Escape From Modern Babylon



Palgrave Studies In Oral History- 2008 - Series Editors' Foreword

In another book in the Palgrave Studies in Oral History series, *Soldiers and Citizens*, an Assyrian Christian explains how his group in the Iraqi town of Dora was threatened with death if they didn't convert to Islam or pay a special tax or abandon their homes and leave within 24 hours. He remarked, "I heard there was talk of doing to the Christians what they did to the Jewish in the 1940s."¹ The year 1941

witnessed the Farhoud, a Nazi-inspired pogrom, which began a series of events that propelled a Jewish exodus from Iraq. Of the approximately 137,000 who resided in Iraq during the early 1940s, 124,000 had fled, most to Israel, by 1952.

The relatively few left behind suffered as a result of the Six Day War in 1967 when Iraq restricted their movement, jobs, and opportunity to communicate in and outside of the country. Some suffered imprisonment and torture. Hence, the once vital and vibrant Iraqi Jewish community had all but disappeared from its homeland by the 1970s. Oral histories have widely documented the Holocaust, but the stories recounted in this volume are less well-known and serve to expand our knowledge of Middle Eastern Jews outside of Israel. Oral history is particularly well suited to capture the drama and trials of this historical experience and to humanize the past condition of a community that exists in exile. With American attention focused upon Iraq as a consequence of two recent wars, public curiosity about that nation will benefit from these accounts. *Iraq's Last Jews* joins a number of other volumes in this series that consider issues of world-historical significance. Whether it be the contemporary Iraq War or the decades-past Chinese Cultural Revolution, or any number of other topics, the series encourages the employment of oral history to investigate the memories of ordinary and extraordinary people in order to make sense of past and present.

Bruce M. Stave University of Connecticut - Linda Shopes Carlisle, Pennsylvania

Preface

Some 2,500 years after the first Jews established roots in Babylon, the once-vibrant and prosperous Jewish community of Iraq has disappeared. A community that numbered close to 140,000 in the late 1940s—and comprised fully one-third of Baghdad's population—consisted of a mere 20 when U.S. tanks rolled into the Iraqi capital in 2003. Today, fewer than ten Jews remain in Iraq. Yet as late as the 1920s and 1930s, Iraqi Jews felt the heady potential of full equality in a secular society for the first time in their long history of subordination to Muslim rulers. From music to politics to commerce, Jews played a major role in Iraqi society and culture. For centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, Babylon was the world's epicenter of Jewish life and religion—the place where the Babylonian Talmud was written and where rabbis from across the region and Europe came to learn from the most scholarly sages. But the community dissolved in the middle of the 20th century when pro-Nazi forces, Arab nationalism, and the formation of Israel led to violence against and a general sense of insecurity among Iraqi Jews, causing them to flee, mostly over the course of about a year and a half. This book tells the story of that last generation, people who in many cases grew up with strong patriotic feelings but were always prepared for a future beyond Iraq's borders—just in case. The storytellers of these first-person

accounts vary as widely as any group of Jews does, reflecting the breadth and texture of the community: wealthy businessmen and Communists, popular musicians and reformist writers, Iraqi patriots and early Zionists. Many had close friends among the Muslims and Christians of Iraq of whom they speak warmly. They tell the tales of a people with a love for their birth country that persisted even as they were forced to leave their homes. The story of the final decades of the Jewish community in Iraq divides into three periods. First is the period before 1939 when the Jews in Iraq saw themselves as part of the Iraqi national fiber in government, commerce, and the arts. That ended verbally with the rise of Nazi influences and violently with the Farhoud, a pogrom against the Jews, in 1941. Second is the period between then and 1953 when Arab hostility toward the new state of Israel turned most Jews into Zionists and the vast majority of the community left. The final period records an Iraq that drifted towards increasingly autocratic leadership, culminating in the sadistic dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, with the Jews often playing the role of scapegoat. Finally, the book closes with several moving retrospectives of the community. These stories are sometimes funny, often tragic, touching, and insightful. Readers will find that the editors, in addition to recording descriptions of daily life, have also uncovered acts of heroism, adventure, and intrigue: from the undercover Israeli agents who helped orchestrate the mass emigration of Iraqi Jews to the young Jewish state at mid-century, to those who argued for the lives of their loved ones in the brutal prisons of Saddam Hussein. What has been compiled here, ultimately, is a book about quiet bravery in times of distress and a celebration of the possibility of peace.

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