

Jewish Virtual Library ~ Jews Of Iraq



One of the longest surviving Jewish communities still lives in Iraq. In 722 B.C.E., the northern tribes of Israel were defeated by Assyria and some Jews were taken to what is now known as Iraq. A larger community was established in 586 B.C.E., when the Babylonians conquered the southern tribes of Israel and enslaved the Jews. These Jews distinguished themselves from Sephardim, referring to themselves as Baylim (Babylonians). In later centuries, the region became more hospitable to Jews and it became the home to some of the world's most prominent scholars who produced the Babylonian Talmud between 500 and 700 C.E.

During these centuries under Muslim rule, the Jewish Community had its ups and downs. By World War I, they accounted for one third of Baghdad's population. In 1922, the British received a mandate over Iraq and began transforming it into a modern nation-state.

Iraq became an independent state in 1932. Throughout this period, the authorities drew heavily on the talents of the small well-educated Jews for their ties outside the country and proficiency in foreign languages. Iraq's first minister of finance, Yehezkel Sasson, was a Jew. These Jewish communities played a vital role in the development of judicial and postal systems.

In the 1936 Iraq Directory, the "Israelite community" is listed among the various other Iraqi communities, such as Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and Sabians, and numbering at about 120,000. Hebrew is also listed as one of Iraq's six languages.

Yet, following the end of the British mandate, the 2,700-year-old Iraqi Jewish community suffered horrible persecution, particularly as the Zionist drive for a state intensified. In June 1941, the Mufti-inspired, pro-Nazi coup of Rashid Ali sparked rioting and a pogrom in Baghdad during the Jewish Feast of Shavuot. Armed Iraqi mobs, with the complicity of the police and the army, murdered 180 Jews and wounded almost 1,000 in what became known as the Farhud pogrom.

Immediately following, the British Army re-entered Baghdad, and success of the Jewish community resumed. Jews built a broad network of medical facilities, schools and cultural activity. Nearly all of the members of the Baghdad Symphony Orchestra were Jewish. Yet this flourishing environment abruptly ended in 1947, with the partition of Palestine and the fight for Israel's independence. Outbreaks of anti-Jewish rioting regularly occurred between 1947 and 1949. After the establishment of Israel in 1948 Zionism became a capital crime.

In 1950, Iraqi Jews were permitted to leave the country within a year provided they forfeited their citizenship. A year later, however, the property of Jews who emigrated was frozen and economic restrictions were placed on Jews who chose to remain in the country. From 1949 to 1951, 104,000 Jews were evacuated from Iraq in Operations Ezra & Nechemia (named after the Jewish leaders who took their people back to Jerusalem from exile in Babylonia beginning in 597 B.C.E.); another 20,000 were smuggled out through Iran.

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