THE AUSTRALIAN

Judaism's shrinking enclave

DEBORAH CASSRELS THE AUSTRALIAN SEPTEMBER 21, 2013 12:00AM

IT'S Friday night. Indonesian Yaakov Baruch is leading the Jewish Sabbath at his home in the time-honoured tradition as the sun sets. The universal language is Hebrew.

Yaakov Baruch, at the Manado synagogue, took up Judaism when told of a family link. Picture: Deborah Cassrels Source: TheAustralian

Tonight the de facto rabbi, descendant of Dutch Jews, is breaking bread with one regular at his small table in Manado, at the tip of North Sulawesi, where he was born. He's happy a guest is joining his Presbyterian grandmother. Usually his father, whose forebears were of German Jewish descent, also attends.

Amid a diminished but determined Jewish community, Manado locals, predominantly Christian, are enamoured of Judaism and Israel: public displays of its symbolism substantiate this.

Against Indonesia's fragile religious balance, it's an implausible place to see Israeli flags, Stars of David and Mossad stickers on cars and taxis; batik shirts emblazoned with Hebrew; the world's largest Menorah; a shop named Purim selling Judaic items; and the only synagogue in the country. (The only other synagogue, in Surabaya, east Java, was destroyed in May.)

Over the past few years, about 10 prominent Indonesian Jewish families have either died out or moved to Jakarta and Java, leaving Manado almost bereft of Jews. Baruch, 31, who learnt of his ancestry from his maternal great aunt 15 years ago over biblical discussion, resurrected his roots with gusto. He is optimistic of a revival.

Raised a Presbyterian, he now dons the orthodox clothes and broad-brimmed hat of Chabad-Lubavitch devotees with impunity. Though few in Manado know the significance of the garb, "everyone here knows I'm Jewish. I want to keep Judaism and Hebrew existing in this country". In the effort for continuity, his Islamic wife is converting and they are raising their toddler son a Jew.

Who would guess this was the most populous Muslim nation on earth?

Yet in this curious outpost of Manado, the majority 80 per cent Christian population embraces Judaism, even incorporating Jewish liturgy into some worship. It also maintains interaction with the Muslims in their midst.

Based on the monotheistic concept, evangelical and charismatic Christians, tagged born-again Jews, promote common ties with Judaism. Several thousand Dutch and some Iraqi Jews, during the colonial era of the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century, were drawn mainly to the spice trade and missionary work. Others fled Nazi persecution in Europe.

Manado officials make it clear Jews are welcome. In a show of goodwill, the local government paid for a makeover of the 10-year-old Shaar Hashamayim Synagogue, an hour from the centre in north Minahasa. They also forked out $150,000 five years ago for the 19m-tall menorah built on a mountain-top facing Manado.

Not to be outdone, and in line with numerous Christian denominations, of which Presbyterian and Protestant faiths dominate, a property developer built a 31m tall statue of Jesus perched atop another outlook. It's a region of contradictions with few polarising influences. And that's how politicians want it to stay.

Indonesia has no diplomatic ties with Israel but tourism -- mainly pilgrims visiting Israel -- and trade links through the Israel-Indonesia Chamber of Commerce are robust. Trade between the two was $US137 million in 2011, a 15 per cent rise on the previous year.

In Manado, support appears more emblematic of religious freedom and is often seen as a counter to extremism. Officials such as Wenny Warouw, former head of Bin (state intelligence agency) in north Sulawesi, trumpet their endorsement.

Warouw, hoping for a seat in the local house of representatives next year, encircled his house with a fence interwoven with giant Stars of David. Asked why, he is bemused: "They are symbols of prosperity." More practically, he adds: "Minahasa people like Jewish people; they think they are a foil against terrorists. Muslim people here are very peaceful and anti-extremist."

Undoubtedly wary after inter-religious violence plagued Poso in central Sulawesi for years, Warouw says the threat is from outside: "We are very close to the southern Philippines where extremists train." Indicating Manado was a well-trodden transit point for terrorists, he says one of the Bali bombers had stayed there after training in The Philippines. Amrozi, who was executed in 2008, had two one-way plane tickets to Manado after the atrocity and was thought to be on his way to The Philippines.

Rotem Kowner, professor in the Department of Asian Studies at Israel's University of Haifa, specialises in the history of the Jewish community in Indonesia. "I tend to regard the recent rise of interest in Judaism and Israel in Manado as a certain anti-Muslim and perhaps anti-government sentiment, as well as a personal quest for their roots," he says.

Of the Christian stronghold and Jewish sanctuary, Warouw says: "People are only friendly to Jews in Manado."

Warouw's comments come after Islamic fundamentalists closed the synagogue in Surabaya, east Java, in 2009 while protesting against the war in the Gaza strip. After the incident, the synagogue, bought with Jewish donations in Surabaya in 1949, was heritage-listed. It didn't save it.

In an unseemly twist, in May it was reduced to a pile of rubble, the land allegedly sold by the Dutch Jewish caretaker to an unknown private investor.

David Mussry, the 89-year-old Iraqi president of the Indonesian Jewish community, and David Abraham, an Iraqi Jewish lawyer representing the community, whose family fled to Surabaya after persecution in 1914, filed a police report.

They allege the Dutch Jewish caretaker of the synagogue since 1967 sold the land for $US4.5m.

Joseph Sayers in May 2011 argued in the Surabaya District Court he was the only Jewish person left in Surabaya, making the use of a synagogue obsolete and entitling him to buy the land from the government.

News of the synagogue's demise spread through Jewish communities in Australia and internationally but the circumstances were vague, according to Jeremy Jones, director of International and Community Affairs of the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council. He said some saw it as a sad sign that a once vibrant community had ceased to function.

Most, including Jones, were unaware of the details, assuming fundamentalist involvement. But the incident has renewed criticism of Indonesia's inaction to protect religious and ethnic minorities and highlighted concern over human rights abuses.

Jones says: "Others saw this as a manifestation of the challenges to many minority religions in Indonesia, with some Christian groups intimating that this was their future also given attacks on churches, and Ahmadiyahs (a Muslim sect) saying that this showed the intolerant force of Indonesia towards any groups outside those few named specifically as legitimate religions."

Asked about the future for Indonesian Jews, Andreas Harsono, a journalist and Indonesia consultant for Human Rights Watch, says: "If we look at the Jewish community in Surabaya and Manado since the Dutch colonial time, I am afraid that the trend is not going to change; it's getting smaller. Religious persecution against minorities like the Jewish community is consistently getting higher in Indonesia over the last 60 years.

"I would argue that President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had basically strengthened the legal infrastructure to discriminate against religious minorities in Indonesia since he came to power in December 2004."

Numbers of Indonesian Jews are estimated at about 200 and there are another 200 Jewish expatriates. Most live in Jakarta and Surabaya, some in Bali and Manado. Many have intermarried, converted to other religions and assimilated, significant numbers for safety.

Jones cites testimony of "vicious intellectual anti-Semitism and knows that bizarre images of Jews and Judaism not only exist but generally go unchallenged".

As sectarian violence targeting minorities increased in the past few years, the central

government has been accused of remaining silent on human rights abuses and failing to uphold the law.

Religious freedom is stated in the constitution but the government recognises only six religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Census data shows about 0.5 per cent fall outside these faiths, but most from minority religions classify themselves on identity cards under an official religion for protection.

The outward display of Jewish acceptance makes Manado generally a safe haven for people such as Baruch. It's not the same in Jakarta, where his life has been threatened by Islamic youths demanding he remove his kippah (head covering) . "Outside Manado I have to keep a low profile. Here I am free to fight back and take a stand. My clothes bring attention but there is no safe place to go."

When travelling and even in parts of his home town, he wears layman's clothing in potentially troublesome areas.

He changed his name, his faith and his life after learning he was great-grandson of a 19th-century Dutch Jewish immigrant called Elias van Beugen: "I made a strong decision to keep the Jewish faith."

He was named Toar Pallingin, after his father, who was raised a Protestant. His late mother was Muslim. Despite his religious candour, Baruch's birth name remains on his ID card because Judaism is not one of Indonesia's six sanctioned religions.

Father and son teach law at Manado's Sam Ratulangi University. Completing the circle, Pallingin, 53, discovered three years ago his maternal great-grandmother was German Jewish.

Fluent in Hebrew, Baruch has visited Israel six times. Gleaning most of his religious knowledge from the internet he also immersed himself in Singapore's Chabad-Lubavitch community, where the rabbi welcomed him. But "Google and YouTube taught me how to be a Jew. I learnt about Jewish life from movies".

His great aunt told him of 10 other Dutch Jewish descendants in Manado. "I was very excited. Most of them only knew they had Dutch heritage."

Among them was a renowned Dutch Jewish descendant family called Bollegraf. Oral Bollegraf, 53, was raised a Pentecostal Christian but knew his grandfather had maintained the family home as Manado's only synagogue.

His great grandfather Abraham was a Dutch Jew who was married twice, the second time to an Indonesian. "I knew about my heritage when I was very young but we didn't talk about it for safety reasons," Bollegraf says over a meal with his Pentecostal wife, Ma Lan.

Their parents had been forbidden to say they were Jewish, says Baruch. "It was the (second world) war and the Jews were being taken to Japanese internment camps just as they were by the Germans."

Bollegraf, now revelling in his religious freedom, sometimes wears a kippah publicly while practising at the Manado synagogue and at home. He and Ma Lan have four children, including a son who has had his bar mitzvah.

Yet the threat of reprisal is never far away: Baruch and his fellow Jewish descendants in Jakarta and Surabaya openly talk of their fears, and some in Jakarta who uphold the Sabbath and Jewish holidays in their homes did not wish to be identified.

Says Baruch: "We live in a jungle. We don't have any protection, so many people don't want to enter their identity (on ID cards). It's like we live during the time of Hitler. Nobody guarantees our life."

After Indonesia's independence from The Netherlands in 1949, most descendants converted to Christianity or Islam for protection. "As a Jew in Indonesia, I do the best I can. If someone wants to destroy the synagogue they will, but I believe God takes care of it," Baruch says.