



Locals standing next to a pro-Israel sign in the Indonesian city of Manado.

Deborah Cassrels

The little-known story of the Iraqi Jews of Indonesia

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"We were all starving; the hunger was horrendous. Sometimes we collected banana skins to roast and eat. We were like skeletons."

Benjamin David, an 84-year-old Australian-Iraqi Jew, could be recalling Holocaust scenes. He is not. But his own nightmare, which played out simultaneously on the opposite side

of the world in Europe, has left a bitter legacy.

Talking from his home in Sydney, Australia, David is reliving childhood memories of the years he spent in Japanese internment camps on the Southeast Asian archipelago of Indonesia – then known as the Dutch East Indies.

He was just 4 when he and his family were forced into a camp, along with other Jews,

after the Japanese invaded the then-Dutch colony in 1942. He still bears the physical and psychological scars of deprivation and brutality.

Stories of repression, disease, starvation, torture, segregation, resilience, faith and death are largely unknown – but are starting to emerge.

"After the war I had nightmares for about 20 years."

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David closes his eyes and tilts his head back. "My nightmares were about the Japs knocking at our door, taking us to the camp ... and I saw a lot of people hung."

He recalls his incomprehension at witnessing, as a young child, five Indonesian men hanged for stealing or smuggling just before the war ended. His mother pulled him away, saying, "They're only dolls." He did not learn the brutal truth until he was married and had a daughter.

David's parents had migrated to Indonesia, where he was born, from Burma (now Myanmar) in 1933 to escape conflict. His maternal grandfather had left Iraq in about 1926 for Rangoon, where he met his future wife (whose parents were Iraqi).

Of some wonder is how David's indomitable mother, and other Sephardi women, still managed to observe the Sabbath and Jewish holy days while interned – to the bemusement of their Japanese captors.

Solomon Elias, now 94, was about 13 when the Japanese invaded the archipelago. As a young teen, he qualified for the men's camps and recalls the starvation, endemic disease and forced hard labour – "digging dirt and carrying it in bamboo baskets. It was meaningless work to break our bodies and spirits. And when the Japanese spoke to us, we didn't understand so they beat us with bamboo sticks," recounts Elias, who also moved to Australia after the war and settled in Queensland.

The Jewish population of the Dutch East Indies is believed to have exceeded



Left: The 19-meter-tall menorah in Manado. Right: Rabbi Yaakov Baruch at the Sha'ar Hashamayim synagogue in Minahasa, on the island of North Sulawesi.



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2,500 in the late 1930s, growing substantially as European refugees fled Hitler.

Rotem Kowner, an Israeli professor of Japanese history and culture at the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Haifa, says the Japanese repression of Jews was different from the Nazi genocide. "They were not targeted for being Jewish," he explains; instead they were rounded up simply for being outsiders.

Although most foreigners were sent to internment camps after the Japanese invaded the colony in March 1942, Iraqi Jews retained their freedom for some months. It was in 1943, when visiting SS officers learned that the Iraqi Jews were not detained, that they demanded their incarceration. Until then, the local Jewish community had proved a conundrum for the Japanese due to their lack of knowledge about the Jewish community in general.

After being rounded up, the Jews were segregated and apportioned the worst treatment of anyone in the camps. However, Kowner insists the Japanese treatment of the Jews was not comparable to that of the Nazis: "The Japanese did not massacre Jews (as Jews), nor did they torture them collectively (as Jews)."

Paradise lost

How this little-known, tight-knit Sephardi community came to settle in the then colonial Dutch East Indies is a subject of cultural intrigue, exile and high drama. It is also the subject of my upcoming book, which emanated from my foreign correspondence in Indonesia, including a story on Dutch-Indonesian Jewish descendants. This, in turn, led to the story of the Sephardi Jews whose lives converged, then scattered, in the maelstrom of history.

The Iraqi Jews of Indonesia had fled Baghdad in the early 1900s during waves of persecution, riots and instability. Roughly 600 of them eventually migrated to the port of Surabaya, East Java, following the Asian trading routes – including the spice and opium trades.

They had arrived from countries such as Singapore, India, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Burma in search of a safe haven – and serendipitously found a paradise. For a while, anyway.

Despite settling in a majority-Muslim nation where Judaism is not among the six officially recognized religions, the Iraqi Jews blended in fairly smoothly. That they were multilingual – speaking Arabic, Malay, Dutch, Bahasa Indonesia and Javanese – worked to their advantage as they sought access to all stratas of society.

They were not the only Jews on the archipelago. As previously reported in

Haaretz, Dutch Jews had arrived in the region as early as the 17th century, when they worked as clerks and traders as part of the Dutch East India Company.

In the 1900s, the major port city of Surabaya was a tropical refuge where the Iraqi Jews practised their faith with impunity under Dutch colonial rule and savored a relatively privileged, carefree lifestyle. Indonesia was socially less stratified than the British colonies and the Jews enjoyed the same benefits as the Dutch: membership in country clubs, free Dutch educations, house servants, cooks, gardeners and drivers.

"Indonesia was a paradise at that time. Living was so easy. When my parents left [after the war], they cried," David recalls.

A resourceful bunch, the Sephardim worked mainly as traders, fruit wholesalers, teachers, optometrists, and as importers and exporters.

The nexus of community life revolved around the synagogue – the first on the island – which was built in 1923. A larger version replaced it in 1939, just as the world descended into chaos. (The synagogue was ultimately closed by Muslim fundamentalists in 2009 in protest at the Israeli army's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza.) It was later demolished and its Dutch-Jewish caretaker allegedly sold the land in 2013, to the ire of the community president and a local Jewish lawyer who challenged him in court but lost the case.

After liberation, Jewish survivors returned to Surabaya to find their possessions and homes expropriated by the Indonesians and with the violent 1945-1949 Battle for Independence in full swing. Communal life dried up and many left for Singapore, Australia, Israel

and the United States.

A revival saw vibrant Sephardi life return and peak for several years in the early 1950s. But the political and social landscape became untenable when newly independent Indonesia nationalized Dutch enterprise and the Dutch were forced to return to the Netherlands.

The Iraqi Jews, who were dependent on the Dutch for work, found opportunities had vanished.

About the same time, Indonesian anti-Israel sentiment escalated over the nascent Jewish state's involvement in the Suez Crisis of 1956. Once again, they were forced to seek new, safe shores.

Hundreds arrived in Australia in the late 1950s, only to be confronted by anti-semitism and the restrictive White Australia Policy. The authorities often determined that dark-skinned Sephardi Jews were ineligible for immigration, unless they could prove otherwise.

By 2014, there were fewer than 100 Iraqi Jews in Surabaya and today there are about 10, if that. Many descendants have converted, intermarried and assimilated, mainly for protection against Islamic intolerance and extremism.

The total number of Jews in Indonesia today is believed to be about 400, out of a population of 273 million. But their dynamic legacy remains in various landmarks and in Surabaya's anomalous Jewish cemetery. Their lives are part of accounts of sprawling families and of the acceptance and hostility they found in Indonesian and Australian society, past and present.

Lesson from the past

Interest in Indonesian Jewry intensified in January after the first Holocaust Muse-

um in Southeast Asia opened in far-flung north Minahasa, at the tip of the Indonesian island of North Sulawesi, 2,500 kilometers (1,550 miles) east of Surabaya.

The island's deputy governor said at the time the museum provided a lesson from the past that must be understood. But the museum – the concept of Indonesian and Dutch-Jewish descendant Rabbi Yaakov Baruch – provoked an uproar among some Indonesian Muslim leaders and Baruch was inundated with death threats.

Opposition from Islamic leaders, calling for the museum's demolition, cited potential communal tensions and conflicting pro-Palestine interests. Though tensions have eased, the furor took Baruch by surprise.

"I didn't know it would make such a big impact," Baruch says. "There is a lot of Holocaust denial and antisemitism here. Threats via social media warned 'they will come to kill me because my blood is halal.'"

An hour from the center of Manado, the capital of North Sulawesi, the Sha'ar Hashamayim museum abuts an eponymously named synagogue – now the only one in the country – where the tiny but determined Jewish community practices in a Christian-dominated region. About a quarter of the con-

gregants are of Dutch-Jewish ancestry; the others are Christian converts.

Manado locals are enamored of Judaism and Israel, and public displays of its symbolism confirm 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, the world's largest menorah and a shop named Purim selling Judaic items.

Manado officials have long made clear that Jews are welcome in their city. The local government paid for a makeover of the Sha'ar Hashamayim synagogue (originally a gift from a devout Dutch-Christian couple in 2004), and in 2008 spent \$150,000 on the 19-meter (62-foot) menorah perched on a mountaintop overlooking the city. The synagogue underwent further renovations in 2019, thanks to an anonymous donor and congregants' goodwill.

Amid the recent fracas, a local Christian militia group vowed to protect Jewish interests, Baruch says.

The museum's opening on International Holocaust Remembrance Day was also a poignant tribute to Jewish survivors of Japanese war camps.

Deborah Cassels is currently writing a book on the Iraqi Jews of Indonesia.

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