Reaching Sephardic Jews in North America

Paper presented at LCJE-North America, March 10, 1999

By Joshua Sofaer

An Intelligent Donkey

Two Jews, Ezra and Farhud, were partners; one lived in Mosul, and the other in Basra. They would send merchandise to each other, sell the goods, and divide the profits. The partnership had continued for twenty years, without the partners ever having met or knowing each other.

One day Ezra, the partner from Mosul, wrote to Farhud and said that he wanted to visit him. Farhud replied, "You are welcome."

The inhabitants of Basra are hospitable by nature, they love to offer a wholeheartedly gracious welcome to all visitors. When Ezra arrived in Basra on his donkey, Farhud met him and invited him to stay in his house.

Many steaming courses of delicacies were served at the midday meal--fruits and nuts, Hamin, and zalata. The guests ate well and enjoyed their meal and company. When Ezra was already full, Farhud served and yet another dish saying, "In honor of this house, eat this." The guest ate the dish, but he did so unwillingly because he was already full.

Then Farhud's wife came over and said to him, "In my honor eat this." Farhud ate this course as well, even though he didn't want to eat anymore.

Farhud's son and daughter did the same thing. Ezra, too shy to refuse them, ate in their honor as well.

Afterwards, Ezra took his donkey and set out for home. When the two reached the River Tigris in Baghdad, the donkey was thirsty and began to drink from the River. When the donkey finished drinking, Ezra wanted him to drink more.

"In my honor, drink more," Ezra told the donkey, but the donkey did not answer him, and did not want to drink anymore.

"In the honor of my partner Farhud, drink," he said, but the donkey did not answer him.

"In honor of Farhud's son and daughter, drink," but the donkey neither answered nor drank.

Then he turned to the donkey and said "My donkey, my donkey, you have more intelligence than I have," and continued on his way to Mosul.[1]

I added the aforementioned story to give you a flavor of Middle Eastern Jewry. Maybe Basra, Mosul and Baghdad are not places that you associate with Jewish things, but these were the places I heard about as a child; they were Jewish! The Shtetl stories that are familiar to the Eastern European Jewish experience are not part of my Jewish experience, nor are they the experience of thousands of other Jews living in North America. This paper is entitled "Reaching Sephardic Jews in North America." I need to give a disclaimer. Because of the focus of this paper, there are many world Jewish

[1] Malemed, Ora ed., The Annals of Iraqi Jewry, Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 1995.

communities that are not mentioned. This is not due to lack of importance, but the do fall outside the scope of this particular paper at hand. The paper's focus is on the North American Sephardim.

Reaching Sephardic Jews is a subject very close to my heart and something I care deeply about. It's long been a desire of mine to bring attention to a segment of the Jewish people that has been largely forgotten by North American Jewish missions. Before I get into the bulk of the paper, I thought it would be good to give a brief introduction to my Jewish experience and let you hear who I am as a Jewish person.

I come from an Iraqi Jewish family. The Sofaers in Iraq for many centuries, some say descending from the Babylonian exile in 586 BC. We know for sure that as of four generations ago, Sofaers were living in Baghdad. My great grandfather moved from Iraq to Rangoon, Burma and began a business in the British colony there. Moving from Iraq to India at this time was common. In fact, at the beginning of the 20th century, India was a country with a significant Iraqi Jewish community. They called themselves *Baghdadi.* There were also two indigenous Indian Jewish communities known as *Cochin* Jews and *Bnai Israel.* Around 1920, the Sofaers moved from Burma to Bombay, India where my grandfather, David, met my Grandmother, Mozelle. Mozelle's family is also *Baghdadi,* but she was born in Alexandria, Egypt. Her family, the Ezekiels, had been out of Iraq for some time working in trading. One of the more exotic jobs Mozelle's father had was to sell Fez caps through northern Iraq and Syria. Nearly the same time as the Sofaers moved to India, the Ezekiels arrived also. David and Mozelle met, got married and raised a family

in Bombay. My father and four of his siblings grew up in British India and moved to the United Stated in the early 1950's. I am first generation American born. Something of notable interest is a connection that Jews from India had to New York City. Many of the *Baghdadi* Jews living and working in India produced textiles; silk, cotton, etc. The most famous company was the Sassoon Trading Co. Perhaps some of you have heard of it? For those of you who have family connections to the *shmatte* business in New York or London, Jews in India likely produced many of the raw materials. It makes me proud to have such a rich and exotic Jewish heritage.

We need to pause and define exactly what we're talking about when we say reaching Sephardic Jews. There are Sephardic prayer books, Sephardic dietary laws, Sephardic kippot, Sephardic music, but who or what exactly is a *Sephardic* Jew? The dictionary defines Sephardic Jews as "members of the occidental branch of European Jews settling in Spain and Portugal..."[2] The dictionary definition however, does not pick up on the more common understanding of the term. This common meaning is an extremely important first step to understanding Sephardic Jews. In North America today, Sephardic has come to refer to all Jews not of Ashkenazic descent, not just Jews from Spain and Portugal. As a result, many of the Jews living in North America who would call themselves Sephardic are not technically Sephardim. Confused? Let me try and explain.

In some ways, the difficulty in finding an accurate definition for the Sephardim can be explained in terms of a family. The family of Sephardim is

[2] "*Sephardic*", Websters Collegiate Dictionary, 1983.

made up of a variety of different backgrounds and cultures. Jews from Spain, Morocco, Italy, Greece, Israel, Syria, Yemen, Tunisia, Iraq, and India are all part of the family. Within the family, the differences and uniquenesses are recognized. Individual groups of Jews are Baghdadi or Persian or Libyan. To those not in the family however, they are all are Sephardic. I would, for example, feel comfortable referring to myself as Sephardic, even though my background is Iraqi. In 1984 there were an estimated 220,000 Sephardic Jews living in North America, excluding Israelis - 3.6 percent of the total North American Jewish population[3]. Here, the Sephardim are a minority within a minority. Not only must they struggle for survival as Jews, but also as Sephardic Jews. In light of a much larger and better-organized Ashkenazi Jewish community, Sephardim have banded together as one group. One possible reason for this "family" mentality was a survival response to the broader Jewish community that defined Jewishness by Ashkenazi standards. For the family of Sephardim, everything from language and food to religious observance is different from that of the Ashkenazim. Rather than explain all the differences, many non-Ashkenazi Jews choose to define themselves as one group - Sephardim.

As missionaries, does our terminology matter when talking with Sephardic Jews? Yes! Those of you who are Jewish believers appreciate it when a non-Jew takes the time and effort to gain a deeper understanding of your culture. Their care will often open you to a discussion you may not ordinarily have. In the same way, recognizing the distinctives of the Sephardim in the course of ministry will help to create a platform for witness. You may have found

---

[3] Elazar, Daniel, The Other Jews, New York: Basic Books Inc., 1989. Pg. 51.

this principle to be true in ministry to Russians. Even a few words in their language can build enough rapport to delve into spiritual topics. The expectation among many Sephardim is that other Jews will either have no interest in their cultural distinctives or will simply see it as a novelty. Taking the time to discover the Sephardim will not only improve our witness, but it allows us to better understand the people whom God has put on our hearts to reach.

Through the course of this paper, I will briefly talk about a few of the different groups, mentioning their names as I go. For purposes of brevity however, when I use the term Sephardim, I am using it is it's broadest sense-as the "family" of Sephardic Jews.

The information I have to present comes from my own history as a Sephardic Jew, from real witnessing experiences, from conversations with others working to reach Sephardim, and from books on the subject of Sephardic Jewry. I do not intend to make sweeping statements regarding "the best" way to reach this particular segment of the Jewish community--you are leaders and strategists in a field that I am very new in. Rather, I will offer suggestions that may help you develop a strategy for reaching Sephardic Jews. My focus will be Three-fold: (1) to define *Sephardic* for our missionary work and purposes of this paper; (2) to give a brief history of the Sephardim in North America; (3) to give you five distinct cultural aspects of Sephardic culture that require a unique presentation of Y'shua.

Some may ask the question, "How did so many Jews get to so many different places?" God's promise in the Torah to scatter us has been a true one indeed![4] We are familiar with the Biblical dispersions of the Jewish people to Assyria, Babylon, etc., but the modern Diaspora is less understood. The modern Diaspora, beginning in the post-Second Temple period, spread east before it spread west. We often think of Diaspora Jews as spreading into Europe, but prior to the 11th century, the majority of Jews lived in the Middle East and Mediterranean areas. During this time, Babylon was the undisputed center of the Jewish world and Jewry had a distinct Middle Eastern flavor.

With the advent of Islam in the 7th century, Jews found themselves part of a society that was amicable. Opportunities for social, political and economic advancement existed. Jewish people, by in large, comfortably fit into the Islamic world. Therefore, as Islam spread, so too did the Jewish community. Jewish people populated the Middle East, North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, Persia, and even the Orient. Through the first millennium, Jewish people were primarily Middle Eastern and not European.

Perhaps the best known period of Sephardic history is in 15th century Spain. The Inquisition and Expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 halted one of the freest times in Jewish History. The late 14th and early 15th centuries are sometimes called the golden age of Jewish history. The atrocities committed to end this period are still recounted today and have left a indelible mark on the Jewish psyche. The Expulsion produced two significant changes in Spanish Jewry; a scattering of Spanish Jews all over the world and a new

[4] Lev. 26:33

group of Jews called Conversos, also called Marannos.[5] Conversos confessed Jesus as Messiah under duress while secretly maintaining Jewish practices. Into the 16th century, living conditions in Spain worsened and these Conversos left for the New World and took an active role in the European and Spanish presence in the Americas. Mair Jose Bernadette, Professor of Hispanic Jewish History at Columbia University writes, "The Marrano Jews helped in the preliminary preparations making Columbus' discoveries possible. Even though Marranos met with difficulties in leaving Spain for the West Indies, in Tierra Firma [The New World] they managed to establish themselves in most every Hispanic settlement.[6]" The descendants of these Converso settlers were the first Jews to set foot in North America. It's of interest that relatives of these Conversos are still living in Mexico, the Caribbean, and New Mexico today.

The earliest recorded Jewish presence in North America was in 1654 when 23 Spanish Jews arrived in New Amsterdam from Brazil.[7] The Jewish community grew slowly through the middle of the 19th century. 1776 is an early reference point for Jewish population. There were approximately one thousand Jews living in North America, half of whom were Spanish in origin. I would like to mention the first recorded Jewish believer. Judah Monis, a descendant of Portuguese Conversos, immigrated to New York in 1717. Through the witness of Increase Mather and John Leverett, Monis

---

[5] I choose not use the term *Marrano* because it's use was derogatory in referring to Jews.
[6] Bernardete, Mair Jose , Hispanic Culture and Character of the Sephardic Jews, New York: Sepher Hermon Press, 1982. Pg. 156.
[7] Elazar, 163.

confessed faith in Jesus as Messiah in 1722.[8] No significant missions agencies were formed prior to the large influx of European Jews to North America. The Jewish community grew steadily in these years of early American and Canadian settlement.

The 19th century saw a radical change in the North American Jewish community. Professor Bernadette states, "[Up to] the middle of the nineteenth century, the Marrano Jews in the United States were, on the whole, the only Jews who counted in national life.[9]" The immense migration of German Jews beginning in the 1850's reduced the Spanish Jewish community to a minority. A early sign telling of this change came in 1825 when a group from Shereth Israel, America's first and very Spanish Synagogue, broke off and began Congregation Bnai Jeshrun, an orthodox and distinctly German Synagogue. These Synagogues would eventually compete for prominence among the Jewish elite. As German immigrants continued to flow into North America, they formed communal organizations that would define not only themselves as German Jews, but would eventually define the Jewish community as a whole. The dominance of European identity in North American Jewry continues to this day.

In the later parts of the 20th century, the Sephardim saw an immigration of their own. Jews from Syria, Iraq, North Africa, and Persia would eventually give new life to a dying Sephardic community. Prior to this "new life," the Sephardim in North America floundered to find their own identity. Because

---

[8] Gribbetz, Judah, The Timetables of Jewish History New York: Touchstone, 1993. Pg. 220.
[9] Bernadette, 158

of language, dress, food, and other cultural distinctives, The Sephardim were excluded from the mainstream of Jewish life. Daniel Elazar, author and Sephardic Jew, notes that "The Sephardim made several attempts to create country-wide organizations to link local communities with major efforts in 1912, 1928, 1941 and 1952, however, unlike the larger masses of Ashkenazim, the Sephardim, until recently, were unsuccessful in such attempts. In 1952 the World Sephardi Federation was reorganized and extended to the United States, but it was not until 1972 that the American Sephardi Federation was actually activated. Since then it has maintained a country-wide organizational structure.[10]" Not until the 1970's did the Sephardi communities have a significant internal structure! The Sephardim are just now catching up with the broader Jewish community and inserting itself as a valid and unique part of the North American Jewish landscape.

New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, Montreal, and Seattle are the cities in North America with the largest Sephardic communities. In the last ten to fifteen years, the Persian community in particular has grown in large numbers having its center in Los Angeles. In 1990 Jewish family services of Los Angeles estimated that there were 50,000 Iranian Jews in the Los Angeles area.[11] Unfortunately I can't give you accurate numbers of Sephardim in North America. Getting accurate demographic information is very difficult. The previously quoted 1984 number of 220,000 Sephardic Jews in North America is the most comprehensive number I have found. I have serious doubts as to it's accuracy and suspect that it grossly underestimates the

---

[10] Elazar, 165.
[11] *Los Angeles Magazene*, June 1985.

number of Sephardim in North America. Today the Sephardim are growing as never before, building Synagogues, publishing newspapers, putting up Web sites, and developing social and religious infrastructures. This may be looked at as somewhat of a "renaissance" of Sephardi culture in North America. The community continues to be small, but is growing fast in terms of its acceptance and validity in the eyes of the broader Jewish community.

Now that we have a brief history of the Sephardim in North America, lets turn our attention to some elements that require a different and unique approach. In this section, I will give five points that are common to all Sephardi Jews. For these points, I will offer a suggestion that may help our witness to be more effective.

1. There is not the same antagonism against Jesus and the gospel message in the Sephardi communities as with European Jews.

In the course of mission work among Jewish people, this point is perhaps one of the most dramatic and challenging. This statement is not to say that all Sephardic Jews will be readily accepting the Messiah, but it does mean that within this community, there is a greater initial willingness to explore the gospel message. The idea that Jewish people do not have a predisposed antagonism toward Christianity flies in the face of what is expected. All of the books on Jewish evangelism I have ever read speak of the deep animosity the Jewish people have against the gospel message and Jesus. The walls that go up when talking to most Jews about Jesus are either not there with the Sephardim, or are much lower. Many younger Sephardi Jews seem to have

adopted an antagonism from their interaction with American Jews. The older ones however, are quite open to discussion. As an example of the kinds of relationships many Sephardim have with Christians, my family provides a unique and interesting example. Both my father and grandfather went to Christian schools, studied the New Testament and considered their relationships with Christians as some of the dearest the had. I would venture to say that this experience is quite uncommon among Ashkenazim.

When I was confronted with the gospel message I was curious and I asked a lot of questions. I didn't make a decision about my faith, but I seemed to have a freedom that many other Jews do not feel. My initial interest was not one of fear and trepidation, but an unhindered openness to exploring a new idea. An interesting observation to a potential reason for this difference, Abraham Lavender, professor in Jewish history, writes; "Sephardic Judaism, in contrast to an Ashkenazi..."Ghetto" mentality, developed in a pluralistic society of relative tolerances and multi-dimensional values where the Jew could take the best of the non-Jewish humanistic cultural values, adapt them to express his Jewishness, and still remain distinctly Jewish."[12] Professor Lavender catches onto something that is very true. Sephardim on the whole do not have the same affront to the gospel message because generally they don't see it as a threat. Even among Spanish Jews, the antagonism is not there.

Suggestion: First, do not raise objections that are not there. We've got a great opportunity to work within the freedom that the Sephardi culture has. We

[12] Gino, Alisa Meyuhas ed., Jews Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean world after 1492, Portland: Frank Cass, 1992. Article by Abraham Lavender, "*The Sephardic Revival*," Pg. 311.

should take advantage of this cultural expression. Second, as we write literature targeted to Sephardic Jews and train missionaries, we should speak directly about Jesus. We can assume a positive and open response, not one that is suspect from the beginning. Using expressions to make the gospel more comfortable to the ears of the hearer is not needed because the level of discomfort is not as extreme.

2. Family obligations hold a much greater importance in making decisions of faith than does Jewishness.

It is rare that a Sephardi Jew will say to a Jewish believer that they are not Jewish if they decide to believe in Jesus. Jewishness is never in question. They may disagree with what you say or become angry, but there is never a doubt about the bloodline of a Jewish person. The issue is one of honor and family pride. An aside to this is the first section of the book of Esther. The King was angry with Queen Vashti because she didn't obey to him--she shamed the king. As a result, the king replaced her. For Sephardim, the importance of honor is very similar to that of King Ahasverus. It is more common that investigation will be halted due to family pressure than reasons of Jewishness. Let me share a story that illustrates this point.

Paul, a Persian Jewish man in his mid-20's, had been a believer for about a year. During that time, he was meeting with a co-worker of mine, Stan Meyer, for discipleship. Paul had recently moved out his parent's house and was regularly attending church and active in his faith. One afternoon, Paul set up an appointment for his mother and sister to meet Stan at a coffee shop

near their home. Paul's mother, obviously upset at Paul, asked Stan for two things. First that Stan would convince Paul to move back home and work for his father. This was not a problem, but in the course of the conversation, Stan mentioned that Paul would need to continue attending church and remain active in his faith. His mother stopped Stan in mid sentence. She said that was no good. Paul could believe, that was no problem. He would remain Jewish. Going to church however, was an entirely different matter. When Stan asked why, the mother responded that Paul's father said no. "Paul can't go to church," She explained "If he disobeys his father's request, it brings shame on the family. While Paul is not married he must listen to his father. It is our tradition that the son listens to his father." Just then, Paul's sister came into the conversation and said "If Paul does this I will never marry. You don't want me to die a virgin do you?" Aside from the theatrics, the problem that Paul's family had was not a questions of Jewishness, but that of family obligation. For Paul and many others like him, family plays a much greater role in deciding matters of faith than in many Ashkenazi Jewish families.

Suggestion: With family pressure and obligation as it is, perhaps there is validity in exploring evangelism directed to the household rather then exclusively to the individual. Biblically we see both methods of evangelism in use. The Sephardi family mentality may require a model that many of us, including myself, have not experienced much in North America. I am not endorsing this, but I do think that an approach targeting the "household" is worthy of our consideration and further exploration.

3. There is a great pride in Sephardi culture.

Throughout the Sephardic Jewish community, there is a feeling of great pride in their unique heritage. Sephardim have long felt the pressure to assimilate into the European Jewish community, something that many Sephardi Jews have done. Today, the North American Jewish community is in a new era that accepts Jewish diversity rather than quelling it. Sephardim are gaining a voice to express their unique expression of Jewish identity. Yet, there still remains a skepticism that many Sephardim hold when it comes to receiving an equal place in the Jewish community. This pride in Sephardi heritage is seen vividly in attending a service at New York City's Shereth Israel congregation.

Upon entering the Synagogue, you are met with a reminder the this is the first and oldest congregation in America, founded in 1695. The Upper West Side building is new. The first structure housing the congregation was built on Mill St. in Lower Manhattan. As you make your way through the building, The walls boast of the Sephardi contributions to Jewish life in America. Names appear like Edie Gorme, Neil Sedaka, and Nathan Cordozo. Men wearing top hats and tuxedos speak to each other in Ladino, a Jewish dialect of Spanish. The service is high and the Hazan sounds more like a professional opera singer than a cantor. The formality and sense of majesty pervades everything done.

Suggestion: We have much to say to this small segment of the Jewish community because we too are a minority. Though we are not motivated by

gaining validation by the Jewish community, affirming the unique heritage among Sephardim will go a long way in developing a good witnessing opportunity. By recognizing the richness of Sephardi culture, we open a door for witness.

4. Language, dress, food, and music are all different and unique.

We know what it is like having food done wrong. With Passover coming up, you may have memories of a matzah ball that is more closely resembled a golf ball? What if, however, the food on your plate was something completely different that you are familiar with? Our family ate Mugag, Hamid, and falliya--all Jewish foods! Cultural expressions like food, dress, language, liturgy, music and the like are what define a group. The Sephardim have wonderful and very exotic traditions. Traditions that have long been overshadowed by the European definition of Jewishness. When we talk about "Jewish music" for example, many of us think of Klesmer. The mail order catalogue "The Source for Everything Jewish" has a severe lack of anything Sephardic! Foreign or strange traditions have been dismissed by saying, "Oh, that must be Sephardic." I can't express to you enough how important these elements are to Sephardic Jews. Let me give you a sense of this richness by listing a few different cultural expressions:

In Yemenite Jewish tradition, in addition to wearing a Talit, many Jewish homes had a fringed garment framed on the walls of their houses. The book of Numbers, in speaking about fringes on garments, says "And it shall be a tassel [fringe] for you to look at..." Yemenite families, in an attempt to obey

this mitzvah, thought of a unique was to look at the fringe. Many families put a fringed garment on the wall, so that whenever you go into a room, you would look at the garment and thus fulfill the mitzvah.

Spanish Jewish communities living in Mexico and the American Southwest will eat soup made of bread, water and salt before a funeral. The day of the funeral, they will fast. It is considered a way for the mourner to show respect for the person who recently passed away. Meat, fruit, and other tasty foods are not eaten near the time of the funeral. Doing so would be considered ostentatious and inappropriate.

In Iraq, all weddings were arranged. The betrothed couple was not allowed to spend time together alone. Before the wedding, the bride to be would receive gifts of fruit and home made sweets on Purim from her husband's family. It was traditional to give 2 gold coins at a wedding. Instead of wearing a ring, the woman would wear golden bracelets of her ankles.

These practices tell us that not all Jews do things the same way. Is one way more Jewish than another? No, of course not. The form that many of these traditions take is as varied as the places where Jews live.

Suggestion: If your orientation is geared to reach only Ashkenazi Jews, try and broaden your focus. Don't assume that "yiddishkeit" equals Jewishness. Not all Jews are familiar with Yiddish or the "New York Jewish" culture. My family spoke Arabic, Hindi, Hebrew, and Aramaic! Creativity and

thoughtfulness is needed to explore and understand these Jewish cultures. As we do so, I believe that it will result in increased witnessing encounters.

5. Sephardim, particularly Jews from Arab lands, have a strong connection to Israel.

Recent immigrants to North America (less than 25 years) have a strong connection to Israel as the center of the Jewish world. Many speak Hebrew, have large families in Israel and feel connected through a common culture. Israel is a country whose population is over half Sephardic. It is reasonable therefore that Sephardic Jews will have a greater affinity to Israel than Jews Who have lived in North America for a longer period of time. Ashkenazim may refer to Brooklyn as "the old country." The Sephardim do not have the same immigrant experience. Often Sephardi Jews did not come through Ellis Island, they never lived on the Lower East Side, and didn't live through the history that took place in those years. As a result, Israel is the heart of the Sephardic world.

Suggestion: Learning and using Hebrew in our witness to Sephardic Jews is very helpful. Yiddish expressions do a great job in helping the Bible come to life, but only for those who to whom Yiddish is familiar. Sephardi Jews will respond much quicker to a Hebrew expression, even if they do not speak with language.

Through this paper, I've introduced you to some of the difficulty in defining the Sephardim. I have given you a brief history of North American

Sephardic life and then tried to point out some unique aspects of Sephardi Jewish culture that require a unique missions approach. Let me now give you 3 applications that you can use in your ministry now. First, in your seminars about Jewish evangelism, include a segment on Sephardim. Talk about their differences and discuss them on the same level of importance as the European Jews many are familiar with. Mention them as distinct and an important consideration in witnessing encounters. Second, hold a Sephardic holiday celebration. We have just finished celebrating Purim; a holiday set in Persia. Wouldn't it be great to have a Purim party where all the food, music, and other elements were Persian. Every Jewish holiday has ample room to include elements of Sephardi Jewish tradition. It doesn't take much--a word here and there will gain you credibility in the eyes of the Sephardim in attendance. And third, get a hold of a book on Sephardi Jewish life. You may want to even make this required reading for your staff and new trainees. I have included a reading list that you can use as a reference. All of the books are readily available at either a bookstore or a college library.

When I look at the Jewish community in North America, I see different groups. I'm afraid that by in large we as missionaries, have only seen one. The Sephardim are vastly under represented in the body of believers. My hope is that this paper will produce a more effective witness to the Sephardim. A thoughtful and diligent study of methods in reaching the entire scope of the Jewish people must include a plan of action to reach the Sephardim. I hope that this paper helps you develop such a plan.

Reading List:

1. Ben-Ami, Issachar ed., The Sephardi: An Oriental Jewish Heritage, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982.

2. Bernardete, Mair Jose , Hispanic Culture and Character of the Sephardic Jews, New York: Sepher Hermon Press, 1982.

3. Davidson, Linda and Gitlitz, David, A Drizzle of Honey, New York: St. Martins Press, 1999.

4. Elazar, Daniel, The Other Jews, New York: Basic Books Inc., 1989.

If you are going to read one book this is the one. The numbers he gives in terms of demographics are somewhat outdated, but this is the best overview of the whole subject of Sephardim.

5. Goldberg, Harvey, Sephardi and Middle-East Jewries, History and Culture in Modern Times, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996

6. Lavender, Abraham ed., A Coat of Many Colors: Jewish Sub-communities in the United States, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977.

7. Primack, Karen ed., Jews in places you never thought of, Hoboken: Katav, 1998.

ALTERNATE ROOTS

Golden Age in Rangoon

RUTH CERNEA

From Baghdad to Burma to contemporary America.

The lives of the Jews in Burma took a drastic turn with the Japanese invasion in 1942. The Burmese welcomed the Japanese, who they hoped would drive the British from the country. Chafing under British domination, the Burmese saw the war as an opportunity to realize their nationalistic aspirations.

It had been a long time since 1907, when Jewish life in the British colony was in its heyday. If there were anything to attest to the colonial riches washing up in Rangoon, it was the gold key the British governor-general used to open the Sofaer office building on the corner of Merchant and Phayer streets. British rule spelled promise for brothers Isaac and Meyer Sofaer and the hundreds of other Jews from Baghdad and Basra who were trickling south and east from what is today Iraq.

In the shadow of Rangoon's Sule Pagoda, the Sofaers sold wine and spirits, and exported oil and rice to other parts of Southeast Asia. Near their store in the center of the city flourished the businesses of other Jews from Iraq— "Baghdadis" such as Isaac Sofaer's in-laws, the Solomons. Ezekiel Solomon had arrived in Burma in 1861, and by the turn of the century the Solomons were the most prominent members of the Jewish community. The Solomons, who also sold wine and spirits, were the primary provisioners of water, from their artesian wells along the riverbank, to the many ships that called at the port of Rangoon.

In tropical Rangoon, Jews owned ice factories and bottling plants. Some dealt in pharmaceuticals, textiles, and timber, while others were clerks, customs officials, small traders, and railway workers. In the years before World War II, 2,500 Jews lived in Burma.

In the first years of the century, Rangoon and Bassein had Jewish mayors, and Judah Ezekiel Street in Rangoon was named for a Jew. Isaac Sofaer donated the iron gates to the Rangoon Zoo, and another Jew, Mordecai Hayim Isaac Cohen, donated the beautiful cast-iron bandstand in Bandoola Square. Jews held a designated seat on the Rangoon Municipal Committee. In 1909 Isaac Sofaer was the Jewish community's representative.

At the heart of the community, on 26th Street, stood the grand synagogue, Musmeah Yeshua, on land the British had allotted to the community in 1853. The building, which still stands, was constructed in the 1890s, its tall columns and 126 silver *sifrei Torah* (Torah scrolls) proclaiming the Jews' affluence and comfort in this lush land.

COURTESY OF SOLLY SAUL

Solly Saul as a Rangoon schoolboy.

Most Jews lived in Rangoon, but some lived in outlying towns such as Mandalay, Moulmein, and Akyab. Ellis Sofaer, Isaac's youngest son, recalls his childhood in the memoirs he wrote for his grandchildren:

"I was born in Rangoon at the time when the sun never set on the British Empire. Queen Victoria had died but three years earlier [in 1901], Britain's greatness shone with brilliant splendour, and the Pax Britannica spread over us like a benign umbrella. It gave us comfort and stability, and it fostered the conviction that God was in his heaven, and all was right with the world.

"In the environment into which I was born, I was exposed to two cultures. The public culture of the British presence, and then there was the private culture of the Jewish family of which I was a member. This duality did not seem strange to me, quite the contrary. Around me I saw numerous ethnic groups similarly placed, behaving at times in the British tradition, and at others in accordance with their own cultural inheritance. Besides the Burmese, there were Moslems, Hindus, Parsees, Turks, Armenians, Chinese, and others. And there were, of course, Jews."

Ellis Sofaer and the more privileged children attended British-run schools, where they played cricket, learned Shakespeare, and ate kosher lunches carried to them by their servants. Others attended the Jewish English School on Sandwich Road, where English teachers and curriculum ensured that they also would become proper English gentlemen and ladies. While their eyes were turned toward an England most had never seen, Judaism remained their one true home. Sabbath, synagogue, and holy days reminded them of their links to generations, to relatives abroad—and to Jerusalem.

As with others of his generation, Isaac Sofaer spoke Arabic and wore Arabic dress, but his children's first language was English. Each child learned Hebrew, but the siddur was printed in three languages: Hebrew, Eng-