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MEMORIES FROM KURDISTAN

In the remote mountains of northern Iraq, the remnants of an ancient Jewish community maintain a tenuous link with relatives who left for Israel over 40 years ago

TEXT BY REUBEN LÖWY, PHOTOS BY FRITS MEYST Iraqi Kurdistan

"I've never shown these photographs to a foreigner before," says Abd al-Aziz as he carefully extracts a handful of faded black-and-white prints from the back of a drawer in his desk. His little jewelry shop in the street market of Suleimaniyah, a bustling town in Iraqi Kurdistan, is crammed to the brim with relatives and friends, all curious to find out what is going on.

"This is the ID card of my mother, Pirosa Benjamin Jacob, born in Halabja, 1926, and my father Shlomo Aziz Hakim, who was born here in Suleimaniyah in 1897. You see, it gives my mother's address as the Jewish Area, house 11/164. And underneath it states that she was not one of those Jews who returned to Iraq after the amnesty expired." Abd al-Aziz explains that the Iraqi authorities, who legalized Jewish emigration for a period in the early 1950s, later issued a brief amnesty to all Jews who wished to return to their homes.

Pirosa Benjamin and Shlomo Aziz Hakim were among the few Iraqi Jews who chose not to join the mass exodus from Iraq to Israel following the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948. "At the time I didn't believe that Israel would survive for very long," admits Shlomo, the father, adding that he was also reluctant to uproot his family and sacrifice his successful merchant business. By the time he had realized his mistake it was too late. The doors out of Iraq were closed.

Today, the Kurdish city of Suleimaniyah, in northern Iraq near the border with Iran, has a population of over a

million. But the vibrant Jewish community that once existed here is virtually extinct. "This synagogue was converted to a mosque in 1955," reads a plaque above the entrance to an old one-story building in what used to be the Jewish quarter. "They simply changed the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to Mecca, and added a stove," says Abd al-Aziz.

Although both his parents are Jewish, Abd al-Aziz, his brothers and sisters were all raised as Muslims and have but the vaguest knowledge of Judaism. They all married Muslim Kurds. At the age of 96, Shlomo Aziz is too old and frail to consider leaving his home in Kurdistan. But his children, and maybe up to several thousand other descendants of Kurdish Jews who stayed behind in the 1950s, are now joining the growing tide of people seeking to leave Iraqi Kurdistan, mainly because of the desperate economic conditions in the region.

Pirosa, Shlomo and their children are among the last remnants of a Jewish community that, according to the Talmud, can be traced back 2,800 years, when Jewish deportees were settled in Kurdistan by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III. Others date the Jewish presence here to the Babylonian exile some 300 years later, following the destruction of the Second Temple, while some legends maintain that the Kurdish Jews are the descendants of one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. Whatever, the few remaining Jews of Iraqi Kurdistan are now either very old, living as Muslims, or both. An uninterrupted Jewish history of 28 centuries



is rapidly approaching its end.

Dana Ibrahim, 83, was raised as a Jew in the small Kurdish town of Koysinjag. Her father, originally a cobbler, later opened a store and grew very rich. "We used to sell everything: hides, walnuts, acorns for tanning, men's clothes and textiles. I especially remember the fox-hides, which were very expensive. They cost one gold coin each," she recalls.

Before the great exodus Kurdish Jews were mainly farmers, wool-dyers and traders. There were also a large number of Jewish silversmiths and tailors.

Dana married a Muslim Kurd at the end of World War II, and went to live with his family in the scenic mountain town of Shaqlawah. A couple of years later her family emigrated to Israel, and she hasn't seen or heard of them since. "But I've never forgotten that I'm Jewish,"



she says, "even if everyone else may have forgotten about me."

Squatting Kurdish-style on the floor of her wealthy Muslim neighbors' living room, Dana speaks of her happy childhood memories of Jewish life and harmonious relations with the Muslim Kurds. "My parents were very religious. We lit 100 candles every Friday night, and we always had chicken for Shabbat, slaughtered by our own *shohet*. With the Muslims we never had any problems — only occasionally some ignorant children would taunt us for being Jewish," she recalls.

"Outside we spoke Kurdish and Arabic," she notes, "but at home we had our own language, 'Zulakai'." The name is Kurdish for "language of the Jews"; the language, which the Jews called "Ibri" or "Targum," is a form of neo-Aramaic that

exists only in a spoken form.

Patient adjustment of the satellite-dish on the roof produces a surprising image, but one that's hardly rare in Kurdish homes nowadays: a broadcast from Israel TV's Arabic service. A big, toothless smile spreads across Dana's face as she sees the Hebrew subtitles and listens to the news in Arabic ("the most reliable in the whole Middle East," say her Kurdish neighbors, seasoned monitors of news bulletins from a wide range of countries).

Dana had nine children with her Muslim husband, who was a battalion commander in the Kurdish *peshmerga* (guerrilla) force in his youth, and she has 36 grandchildren. Despite intermarrying, she never formally converted. So she considers all her children, and the children of her four daughters (who have all married Muslim Kurds), to be Jewish. Today she

Pirosa Binjamin, born in Halabja in 1926, shows off her Iraqi ID card and that of her 96-year-old husband, Shlomo Aziz Hakim

longs to be reunited with her eight brothers and five sisters, who left for Israel around 1950. "But I don't even know whether they are still alive," she says with a sad shrug.

Like their Muslim and Christian neighbors, the remaining Jews of Kurdistan are currently suffering severe deprivation. Since Saddam Hussein launched his ill-fated invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Iraq has been subject to international trade sanctions that cover all items except food and medicine. And for the last three years Kurdistan has suffered a double stranglehold: Saddam imposed his own boycott on the region following a Kurdish uprising and the Kurds'

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establishment of a self-proclaimed autonomous administration with its capital, Erbil. The area of "Free Kurdistan," with an estimated population of 3.5 million, has no industry, little trade, and no money for salaries to civil servants. Its economy has all but collapsed. And to add to the region's woes, the alliance between the Kurdish guerrilla factions which was formed in the wake of the Gulf War has disintegrated; since early May, at least 250 people have reportedly been killed in factional fighting.

Before 1948, demographic studies re-

A two-day pogrom in Baghdad in 1941 accelerated the illegal emigration of Jews to Palestine and attacks on Kurdish Jews followed the establishment of Israel in 1948. By the end of the decade, the illegal emigration had reached such numbers that the Iraqi government gave in and permitted Jews to leave the country. Between May 1950 and August 1951 almost the entire Iraqi Jewish community — some 125,000 people — were airlifted to Israel in Operation Ezra and Nehemiah. Hundreds of Kurdish Jews had been arrested following the establishment of

Israel; almost all of those who could, traveled south to Baghdad to join the exodus, leaving behind property and most of their belongings.

Jewish emigration was halted altogether in 1952, and following the Ba'athists' rise to power in the 1960s and the Six-Day War, the situation of the remaining Jewish population deteriorated sharply. In 1969 nine Jews were publicly hanged on charges of espionage in front of a jubilant crowd. Today only a few hundred Jews remain in Baghdad, where services are held in the Meir Tweg synagogue, as well as a few individuals in Basra.

Until recently nothing was known of the fate of Kurdistan's remaining Jews. Decades of intermittent fighting between Kurdish guerrillas seeking autonomy and the Iraqi army largely kept travelers away. The Kurdish Jews have also been petrified

of identifying themselves, for fear of becoming victims of trumped-up charges of spying for Israel by Saddam's secret police. "Our house was raided so frequently by Ba'ath agents that we had to burn any documents and items that would reveal that I was born Jewish," says one elderly man.

He still wants to remain anonymous, but now out of fear of the extremist Islamic Movement which recently stirred up trouble in Kurdistan before being defeated in fighting with one of the major Kurdish militias earlier this year.

One of the leaders of the fundamental-

ist movement is Hajji Muhammad Aziz, a 90-year-old resident of Erbil. Muhammad is very proud of his title of *hajji*, which indicates that he has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. He also boasts that 30 years ago he built his own mosque in the Kurdish capital. But he is less forthcoming about the fact that he was born to Jewish parents, and has a Jewish daughter, Sarah, who is alive and well — in Israel.

Hajji Muhammad hasn't seen his daughter since the day 43 years ago that she decided to join his parents and siblings in emigrating. Muhammad had fallen out with his father over a love affair with a local Muslim girl and soon after, cut himself off from the rest of the family by converting to Islam ("The most difficult decision of my life — choosing between my family and the True Faith," he recalls). In the end he did marry a Jewish girl, Soreh, and they had six more children after Sarah before he finally made his wife convert to Islam in 1960.

Sarah's Israeli children have never seen their grandfather and Sarah herself has had no contact with him over the years. But thanks to the semi-autonomous status of Iraqi Kurdistan, foreigners and reporters are now able to enter the region via Turkey and the family is finally able to convey a message to him.

Armed with a name, but no address, finding Hajji Muhammad did not prove too difficult given his notoriety as a fundamentalist leader. Squatting on the floor of his elegant house and dressed in flowing white robes, the now 90-year-old Muhammad interrupts his Koran studies to read the letter from his long-lost daughter. He is clearly moved, and after some hesitation, agrees to dictate a short letter back. His four surviving children add their greetings to a sister they have never met.

There are hardly any traces of Jewish communal life left in Kurdistan today. In Acra only a few crumbled walls of the synagogue remain; in Koysin-jag, previously the home of a large and wealthy Jewish community, a covered market in the old quarter that was once wholly occupied by Jewish traders now stands locked and empty. Jewish cemeteries in several cities were destroyed by Saddam Hussein's engineers to make way for roads, or as in Shaqlawah, for a casino and summer residence for the Iraqi dictator.

Things were not always this way. "In daily life, Jewish and Muslim Kurds were so close that we practically grew up together," recalls one elderly Jewish woman. "When their women got married, they would come and borrow our gold jewelry for a couple of days. After the



A letter from children abroad: For years, little was known about Kurdistan's last Jews, who now mostly live as Muslims

ported 187 Kurdish-Jewish communities; of them, 146 were in northern Iraq, and the population was estimated at between 25,000 and 30,000. Jews lived in all the region's major towns and a large number of villages.

Places such as Erbil, Suleimaniyah, Zakho, Amadiyah, Kirkuk, Mosul, Dohuk, Ranja, Acra, and Koysin-jag all had active Jewish communities with synagogues, mikvahs and Jewish quarters.

Piety lay behind the first reported migration of Kurdish Jews to Palestine, in the 16th century. Another 4,000 or so made the journey between 1900 and 1935.



A member of the Hakim family at home in Suleimaniyah, where the synagogue became a mosque in 1955: 'They simply changed the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to Mecca, and added a stove'

ceremony they would bring it back again. Such was the trust between us."

Indeed, intimate friendships between Jews and Kurdish tribal chiefs, such as the famous Mullah Mustafa Barzani who took over the Kurdish Democratic Party in the 1940s, later contributed to warm relations between the Kurdish

leadership and Israel. The Jews of Kurdistan share the hopes of other Kurds for freedom and peace. But they also share the fear of what the future will actually bring — a fear that is leading Kurds to leave the region in increasing numbers.

Back in Abd al-Aziz's jewelry shop in

Suleimaniyah, the local Kurds grill their foreign visitors about how to obtain visas to America or Europe. Claspingsome of his seven children around him, Abd al-Aziz, one of the last Jews of Kurdistan, shakes his head. "Saddam is no good," he exclaims. "Soon we'll leave here. *Inshallah*." □