

The Demise of the Jewish Community in Surabaya

The sound of music drifted down the hallway of the great Mussry house on a broad, palm-lined street called Koninklijke Laan in Surabaya, Java. It was an unfamiliar, melancholy tune to my young ears. It came from David Mussry's room, where I had spent many hours there listening to the records he brought home from his record stand in Toko Piet, the town's big department store. David often asked me whether the new albums he received would sell well or not. That's how I was first exposed to Hank Williams' country music sounds, and the bright new wave of Rock and Roll ushered in by Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley.



Interior of the largely abandoned Jewish synagogue in Surabaya, now demolished

This time, the music sounded very different, very sad. The door was ajar, and I stepped in, filled with curiosity. No one paid any attention to me. My Dad and some men from the Mussry and Judah families were sitting around the gramophone. The poignant song playing was "Where Shall I Go?" by Leo Fuld. An intense debate was in progress. "We should go to Australia," Edward Mussry said. "No, the best place to go is America!" exclaimed John Judah. "Los Angeles is the place to go. The weather is great and jobs are plentiful." There were nods of agreement.

Everyone turned to my Dad, who had tears in his eyes. He was the only one who was born in Palestine. For him there was only one choice. "I want to go back to Israel--it's my country," he said. People started arguing. "Israel? It's crazy. It's very difficult there. There is austerity in the country. And how safe is it?" My Dad shook his head assertively: "I'm not going to replace one Diaspora for another. It's Israel for me!" The arguments went

on and on. Little did I know at the time that I was witnessing the end of the Jewish community in Surabaya. The year was 1958.

The Journey to the Netherlands East Indies

How my Dad, a Sephardic Jew of Syrian (Aleppo) and Greek backgrounds, ended up living and working in Indonesia, makes for a fascinating story.

In the early 1920's, Moshe Bar, a prosperous Baghdadi Jew living in Soerabaya, was seeking a wife. And as was common practice in those days, he contacted a rabbi in Jerusalem to find a good match. It turns out that my aunt, Rachel, the oldest of a family of eight siblings in the Dwek family, was looking for a suitor. The match was made, and Aunt Rachel was soon to embark on a life-changing journey to Soerabaya, where Moshe Bar owned an optical business, Joseph and Co., that manufactured lenses and sold optical equipment and reading glasses in Soerabaya and neighboring cities.



The passenger ship Van
Oldenbarneveld

Rachel's brother—my father, Gabriel Dwek—was then in his early twenties. Sent to a Yeshiva to continue the family line of Biblical scholars, my Dad discovered that he was not really cut out for studies, being more of a hands-on and business-oriented person. After meeting Moshe Bar, and hearing about the exotic Netherlands East Indies, Gabriel agreed to leave Palestine and accompany his sister to Soerabaya. There he became Bar's assistant in the optical shop. Leaving Palestine for a group of far flung islands in South East Asia was an enormous undertaking for my Dad. As

for my aunt, it was a great comfort to have her brother with her in such an alien land.

In Soerabaya, Gabriel and Rachel quickly became part of its small and thriving Jewish community. Most Jews were of Iraqi origin. They left their places of birth at the beginning of the 20th century, following the ancient trade routes to the Orient. A greater impetus to leave Iraq came later, when many left to avoid being conscripted into the Turkish army during the First World War. Others left after the collapse of the Turkish empire.

The Colonial Jew in the Netherlands East Indies

The Netherlands East Indies was an ideal place for Jews to be between the wars. They had been ruled since the early 19th century by the Dutch, who were less socially stratified, and more open to the Jewish population than their British counterparts were in their colonies. In the East Indies, Jews could enjoy all the advantages of colonial life--membership in country clubs, day trips by car and horseback riding in the countryside, and comfortable, luxurious lifestyles that included multiple servants in the households. They had cooks to prepare their exotic Indonesian dishes, housekeepers and gardeners to tidy the house and tend the gardens, nannies to look after the children, and a chauffeur to drive the men to work and the wives to shopping trips and social appointments.



My Dad: A colonial Jew

In 1938, my father traveled back to Palestine to find a bride. He married Esther Cohen, a talented, beautiful woman who was all too eager to go back with him to the exotic Netherlands East Indies. For years, they and their friends enjoyed the pleasures of daily life in Soerabaya's Jewish

community. But their comfortable colonial lifestyle ended abruptly with the start of the Pacific War.

The Japanese Occupation and One Year of Freedom

The Japanese, desperately needing to secure strategic resources—oil, rubber, and bauxite—invaded the Netherlands East Indies in early 1942. Under the slogan of "Asia for the Asians," the liberation from colonial powers, independence, and the promise of East Asian unity, the Japanese rallied the local population to their cause. In a few months, the Allied forces defending the islands surrendered, and all of the Netherlands East Indies fell under Japanese rule.



Japanese conquer Indonesia

The Japanese first interned all Dutch, English, and Australian citizens in their territories. The internment included the European Jews—not on the basis of their race or religion, but of their countries of origin. In fact, identification cards issued to foreigners only identified them by country of origin, not by religion. In a census of all foreign nationals at that time, Armenians and Jews declared themselves as stateless peoples of Mesopotamian origin and were initially spared from the internment camps, since the Japanese had no quarrel with those areas of the world.

A Nazi Delegation Arrives in Indonesia

This situation changed around mid-1943, with the arrival of a German Nazi delegation in Java. It was headed by Helmut Wohltat, the economic adviser to Hitler, who was sent to Japan to coordinate the economic cooperation between the two countries.

In addition to his economic roles in Nazi Germany, Wohltat was also involved in the "emigration" of Jews from Germany, and from German-occupied territories. Given his intense interest in Jewish issues, he inquired about the status of Jews in Java. True to the Nazi cause, Wohltat was appalled when he found out that Jews of Mesopotamian origin, as well as the Armenians and Freemasons, were not interned.



The Tripartite Alliance

On Wohltat's insistence, the Jews were sent to internment camps, where they registered as Iraqis. Interestingly, the Iraqis in Java were the only Jews throughout the Japanese Empire who were interned on the basis of both their race and religion. Fortunately, the Japanese did not heed the German request to apply the "final solution" to the Jews who lived throughout their Empire. Having had no previous contacts with Jews, they were totally ignorant about how to identify them.

Wohltat's order ended the one year of freedom that the Iraqi Jews had "enjoyed" under Japanese occupation—a year of freedom that proved very helpful to them later in the camps. During that period they traded with and provided services to the Japanese soldiers and officers, who, in some cases, ended up as their camp guards. Most importantly, they learned how to communicate with the Japanese and became familiar with their customs.

Life in the Japanese Internment Camps

Initially, all the Iraqi Jews were sent to Werfstraat prison in Soerabaya. After about seven months in prison, they were deported to actual men's and women's internment camps. Boys under 13 years of age stayed with their mothers, while the older boys were sent to a boys camp.



Bowing in Japanese internment camps

Since Japan's conquest of the Netherlands East Indies had taken place with lightning speed, the Japanese were totally unprepared and ill equipped to handle and care for hundreds of thousands of subsequent military and civilian prisoners. They expected soldiers to fight to their deaths. Internment camps were therefore made up of hastily converted army barracks, churches, hospitals, prisons, schools, and blocks of houses that were cordoned off from others in the city.

Prisoners were moved back and forth between camps, mostly by rail, sometimes on foot. The Japanese were completely inept in handling these transfers. Journeys that should have taken a few hours, took days—plagued by poor health conditions, intense heat and a lack of food and water. In unsanitary camps with little medical assistance and supplies, the internees suffered from malnutrition, malaria, dysentery and other ailments. Food parcels sent by the Red Cross were mostly confiscated and used by the Japanese army.

In the camps, the Iraqi Jews lived apart from the Ashkenazi (of European origin) Jews. They stayed in their own barracks and maintained a totally different lifestyle from the other prisoners. The Iraqi women--a

closely knit, highly vocal group, were generally looked down on by the European women. They were excellent cooks and knew how to make the most of their meager supplies. Their Indonesian servants would occasionally come and bring them spices and condiments to make the paltry roots and vegetables they were given more palatable.

The women kept kosher, which was not very difficult, considering the appalling protein-deficient rations given to them by the Japanese. The men were not as strict about dietary laws, rationalizing that survival was a higher calling than keeping kosher. Men and women worked in the fields around the camps, allowing them to bring back freshly picked fruits and vegetables, and trade personal possessions for food with the surrounding natives. Severe punishment awaited those that were caught smuggling food back to the camps. One of the Mussry boys, for example, was caught trying to smuggle a can of cooking oil, and was ordered by the guards to consume all of it on the spot. Miraculously, he actually survived this ordeal!

The pious Iraqis tried to observe the Jewish holidays as much as possible. In my Dad's camp, Tjimahi, they astounded their Japanese guards when they announced that they would not eat on Yom Kippur because it was a holy day of fasting and repentance. Fearing and respecting the intense, spiritual nature of this holiest of days, the Japanese rewarded the Iraqis with roast chicken to break their fast.

Toward the end of the war, the male civilian internees were moved further inland and were transported to labor camps, where they worked on the construction and repair of railroads. My father-in-law, Bob Judah, told us that on one particular day, the Japanese soldiers were all getting drunk and behaving quite belligerently. The prisoners did not know what was going on and did not dare to venture out of their barracks and tents. Only later did they find out that the United States had just dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

The Japanese Surrender and the Rise of Indonesian Nationalism

Japan surrendered on September 2, 1945, before the Allies could actually enter and secure the camps. The angry Indonesian population, badly deceived by the Japanese into thinking that their conquest would give them freedom and independence, seized the opportunity to declare Indonesia as an independent State, with Sukarno as its president. In the absence of any central government, a chaotic period followed. Leaving the camps was very unsafe, and paradoxically, the Japanese were ordered to stay in the camps and protect their former prisoners from the militant Indonesian nationalists.



Indonesian Nationalists

Following their release from the camps, the Iraqi Jews returned to Soerabaya. The city was in chaos. When the Dutch were unable to mobilize and repossess their colony, the British stepped in and bombed the city to restore the old colonial order. Once again, their Sephardic origins served the Iraqi Jews very well. A unit of Indian Gurka soldiers set up their headquarters near the house where my Dad and members of the Judah, Mussry and Aaron families took temporary shelter. Bob Judah's mother, Meeda Aslan, originally from Bombay, spoke to the Gurkas in Hindustani, cajoling them into getting badly needed food and medical supplies. The ever resourceful Bob Judah further 'cemented' relations with the soldiers by fermenting fruit into moonshine and trading the popular drink for milk.

Although many homes and businesses were lost during the war, most ownerships were restored during the brief administrative rule of the British

immediately after the war. During this unsettling period, many Jews left to seek their fortune in other lands. Some left for Australia--among them a young, still single, Bob Judah. My mother, pregnant with me at the time, decided to go back to Jerusalem, where I was born in August, 1946. My father promised to follow her after taking care of pressing financial issues.

As it turns out, my father was unable to keep his promise. His plane made an unexpected stop in Baghdad, and since he had no visa, the Iraqis imprisoned him for a period of 6 months, after which he was sent back to Indonesia. We only saw him three years later—in 1949, when my mother and I made the journey back to Indonesia on a ship called Van Oldenbarnevelt.

The Postwar Years - The Revival of the Jewish Community

The period after the war was almost a throwback to colonial times. I had an excellent Dutch education at the Nassau school in Surabaya, where I discovered my passion for physics, art, and history, and my phobia of math. Although I was the only Jewish kid in the school, I never felt different from other kids. We read Bible stories from the New



The Jewish synagogue in Surabaya

and the Old Testaments, celebrated Christmas with the arrival of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet, and hunted for colored eggs on Easter.

In 1951, my mother gave birth to my brother, Daniel, and three years later, to my brother, Shaul. Our family lived in a small, nicely furnished house on Djalan Kapuas off Darmo street. My parents employed a cook, a gardener, two housekeepers, and a chauffeur. He drove my father to work in the morning, returned to the house to fetch his elaborate hot lunch at

noon, picked me up from school in the afternoon, and drove back to the shop in the evening to bring my father home.

My family led a good life and we enjoyed ourselves. I rode my bike to school and played with the neighborhood kids. On weekends we would go upcountry, to Tretes, as guests of Charlie Mussry, who owned a bungalow. My brother and I joined the Mussry kids, George and Danny, for swimming, horseback riding and hiking to the exotic waterfalls and trails in the area. Charlie had a movie projector and screened movies outdoors on a stretched blanket. Under a canopy of stars, we watched the movie on one side of the blanket, while the curious villagers watched its mirror image from the other side.

On other nights, we sat riveted to the Indonesian shadow puppet shows put up by the villagers. Our nannies and servants, the *baboos* and *djongos*, watched with us, whispering beloved storylines of quarreling gods and humans and romantic jealousies that lit up our imaginations.

At that time, Charlie Mussry was the head of the Iraqi Jewish community in Surabaya. It was at the big Mussry house that we would celebrate all our grand Passover and Rosh Hashana dinners. It also served as a venue for Bar Mitzvahs and wedding celebrations. Their 60-seat dining table was so large that it had to be custom built in the dining room itself.

In 1949, the Jewish community purchased a house on Djalan Kayun, which they converted to a synagogue--the only one in Indonesia. Our synagogue was a hub of daily Jewish life--kids and adults learned Torah, observed Shabbat, gathered in a Sukkah, and joined the fun at Purim costume parties.

Since the community had no official rabbi, services were frequently carried out by my father and the Mussry patriarch, Jacob Mussry, or "Opa," as we called him. They argued often about the conduct of the services,

since Iraqi traditions differed in some cases from my father's Aleppo-based traditions. Since my Dad was a direct descendant of a line of famous rabbis, he considered himself an authority on many religious matters.

As the only Cohen of the Jewish community in Surabaya, he blessed the congregation during services in the Sephardic tradition and acted as a shohet, carrying out the ritual slaughter of animals, so that the community could enjoy special kosher celebrations on Pesach, Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana. In addition, he married couples in the Jewish tradition, and recited the blessings over circumcisions.

My Dad also traveled to Singapore to meet the rabbi there, and to bring back to our synagogue the scrolls of a Torah, which the community had purchased. At that time, the rabbi of Singapore was a Baghdadi scholar named Ezra Meir--the father of five lovely young girls, including Mozelle Tov Meir, who was later to marry Bob Judah, and eventually, to become my mother-in-law!

Farewell to Indonesia

But these idyllic times did not last long. For the Jews of far-away Surabaya, the existence of the growing State of Israel, and its victory in the Sinai war in 1956, stood in stark contrast to their living in a country with the world's largest Muslim population. My Dad had to close his shop during the Sinai campaign for fear of vandalism and his personal safety. The situation worsened in 1958, when a wave of nationalism, fueled by fiery speeches from Indonesian President Sukarno, made the Europeans leave Indonesia in droves. The issue was the



Most of the Jewish community in
Surabaya in 1958

nationalization of Dutch properties, and later, the confiscation of West-Papua (Nieuw-Guinea), the last remaining vestige of the Netherlands East Indies empire.

The infrastructure supported by the Dutch started to crumble. Teachers and students left for the Netherlands, and the scarcity of teachers forced the remaining ones to combine several classes and teach them simultaneously in one classroom. Mafia-style gangs, sensing the vulnerability of the Jewish population, extorted money from my father under a threat to our lives. Danger lurked everywhere. The Jews were soon obliged to bid farewell to the country they had lived in for over three decades.

And so it was that the Dwek family (Gabriel, Esther, Shaul, Danny and I—at age 12) left Indonesia in August 1958 for Israel. Around the same time, Bob Judah, his wife, Mozelle, and their young daughter, Florence, left Indonesia via Singapore, and from there to Los Angeles on board a merchant ship—the SS Wonogiri.

Years later, in 1973, Florence Judah traveled to Israel after finishing her studies at UCLA and visited the Dwek family. We met in my Dad's optical shop in Jerusalem and marveled at old photographs showing the two of us as kids, attending birthday parties and other community events in Surabaya. In 1975 we were married in Los Angeles. My parents and brothers flew from Israel to Los Angeles for the festivities, reuniting with many of the Iraqi Jews they had not seen since their departure in 1958. Our wedding turned into a joyous, memorable reunion of old friends and family members who lived through the greatest and most difficult times in Indonesian history. (The bride and groom were barely in the spotlight!)

Eli and Florence Dwek

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