

# The Human Experience

## On Fire in Baghdad

AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE DESTRUCTION OF AN ANCIENT JEWISH COMMUNITY

*“Judah has gone into exile because of suffering and harsh toil. She dwelt among the nations, but found no rest; all her pursuers overtook her in narrow straits.”* Eichah 1:3

*“He burned through Jacob like a flaming fire, consuming on all sides.”* Eichah 2:3

*Eichah: How? Alas!*

**F**arhud—violent dispossession—an Arabicized Kurdish word that was seared into Iraqi Jewish consciousness on June 1 and 2, 1941. As the Baghdadi Jewish communities burned, a proud Jewish existence that had spanned 2,600 years was abruptly incinerated.

As a nine-year-old, I, Sabih Ezra Akerib, who witnessed the *Farhud*, certainly had no understanding of the monumental consequences of what I was seeing. Nevertheless, I realized that somehow the incomprehensible made sense. I was born in Iraq, the only home I knew. I was proud to be a Jew, but knew full well that I was different, and this difference was irreconcilable for those around me.

That year, June 1 and 2 fell on Shavuot—the day the Torah was given to our ancestors and the day *Bnei Yisrael* became a nation. The irony of these two historical events being intertwined is not lost on me. Shavuot signified a birth while the *Farhud* symbolized a death—a death of illusion and a death of identity. The Jews, who had felt so secure, were displaced once again.

We had been warned trouble was brewing. Days earlier, my 20-year-old brother, Edmund, who worked for British intel-



Ezekiel's Tomb at Kifel

ligence in Mosul, had come home to warn my mother, Chafika Akerib, to be careful. Rumors abounded that danger was coming. Shortly after that, the red *hamsa* (palm print) appeared on our front door—a bloody designation marking our home. But for what purpose?

Shavuot morning was eerily normal. My father Ezra had died three years earlier, leaving my mother a widow with nine children. I had no father to take me to synagogue; therefore, I stayed home with my mother, who was preparing the Shavuot meal. The rising voices from the outside were at first slow to come through our windows. However, in the blaze of the afternoon sun, they suddenly erupted. Voices—violent and vile. My mother gathered me, my five sisters and youngest brother into the living room, where we huddled together. Her voice was calming. The minutes passed by excruciatingly slowly. But I was a child, curious and impatient. I took advantage of my mother's brief absence and ran upstairs, onto the roof.

At the entrance to the open courtyard at the center of our home stood a 15 foot date palm. I would often climb that tree. When there was not enough food to eat, those dates would sustain us. I expressed gratitude for that tree daily. I now climbed that tree and wrapped myself within its branches, staring down at the scene unfolding below. What I saw defied imagination.

On the narrow dirt road, 400 to 500 Muslims carrying machetes, axes, daggers, and guns had gathered. Their cries—*Iktul al Yahud*, Slaughter the Jews—rang out as bullets were blasted into the air. The shrieks emanating from Jewish homes were chilling. I hung on, glued to the branches. I could hear my mother's frantic cries: "Weinak! Weinak!" (Where are you?) But I could not answer, terrified of calling attention to myself.

Amidst the turmoil, I saw our land-

lord sitting by our door, wearing his distinctive green turban. He was a hajji, considered a holy man because he had made the mandatory pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Demanding, raging men were remonstrating with him, and then, inexplicably, they moved on. For some reason, our home was left undisturbed. Only later were we told that our landlord had explained to the men that a widow with nine children lived inside and had asked for his protection. Kindnesses abound when least expected, and for this I thanked G-d.

The horrors continued to unfold. The

filled my nostrils—together with the smell of burning flesh. I will never forget those smells.

How long was I up there—one hour, two hours? I finally jumped down onto the roof, running into my mother's arms. Shaking, she slapped me—a slap of love.

We later learned that after leaving Dahana, these teeming masses of men, joined by others, went on to rampage the other impoverished neighborhoods, later making their way into the wealthier districts. The red *hamsa* signified their targets. All along Baghdad's main Rashid Street, Jewish shops that were closed for Shavuot

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killing of men and children and attacks on Jewish women were rampant. Four doors down—at the home of Sabiha, my mother's good friend—a Muslim emerged carrying what appeared to be a bloodied piece of meat. We learned afterwards that Sabiha had been killed and mutilated. My mother's sorrowful refrain would later ring out: "Sabiha! They attacked her! They cut her throat! They mutilated her!"

At the same time, Jews were scampering over the roofs, running for their lives. If not for the looting taking place below, more would have been murdered. No authorities came to help; barbarism ruled. All the anger and jealousy that had been pent up over the centuries erupted in these horrific moments. Neighbors with whom we had shared a nod, a smile—and even attended their sons' circumcisions—had metamorphosed into sub-humans intent on annihilation.

And then, the fires started. Houses were being torched amidst the cries of their destroyers. Black smoke ascended towards the heavens. The putrid smell of smoke

were broken into and robbed. What the mob couldn't steal, they destroyed. The multitude of synagogues lining the streets were equally ravaged—*sifrei Torah* going up in smoke. The destruction was absolute and relentless.

On June 2, the second day of the *Farhud*, an eerie calm descended. Again, I ran upstairs and climbed the tree. In the distance were airplanes buzzing and bombs dropping. The British, who had camped on the outskirts of town as our communities burned, were finally moving into the city and reclaiming what had so tragically gone awry. But for the Jews of Baghdad this was too little, too late. What had been witnessed and experienced during those 24 hours would ring the death knoll for Iraqi Jewry. Many of us now understood that after 2,600 years, it was time to move on.

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As is the case with most acts of senseless violence, the *Farhud* did not erupt in a vacuum. It was a well-planned pogrom

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organized by nationalistic Arab-Nazis and carried out under the direction of Nazi Arabist and diplomat Fritz Grobba in cooperation with the Arab and Islamic world. It inspired an international Arab-Nazi alliance. Leading this alliance was Hajj Mohammed Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, and Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Gilani. Yet, I believe the *Farhud* was an equal consequence of theological and historically-based attitudes toward Jews.

Under Muslim rule, Jewish existence and welfare were extremely precarious. For Jews living in Iraq, as well as throughout the rest of the Middle East, much depended on the goodwill of the caliphs. Some caliphs were tolerant and offered the Jews economic and political freedom, while others were violently disposed toward them.

However, even in the best of times—as under the rule of Faisal I, the Hashemite appointed in 1921 by the British during their Mandate to preside over the Kingdom of Iraq—times were very challenging. Under Faisal's rule, Jews were given absolute freedom to participate in Iraqi life, but, even so, it was universally acknowledged by Muslims that Jews were second-class citizens. We were always *dhimmi*s living under the protection of the monarch. In their view, we were unquestionably inferior.

Our Jewishness was visible. We had our own dialect and we dressed in Westernized clothes, although, when leaving the house, the women would put on the required black *chador* or *abaya*, a cloak that covered the body from the shoulders down. While most Jews lived in predomi-

nantly Jewish neighborhoods, the Dahana neighborhood, where we resided, held a mixture of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

I always walked to my school, the Alliance Israelite Universelle, with my head down, hurrying through the Muslim areas as quickly as possible. I remember the day a Muslim spat at me and called me a dirty Jew. If a Muslim did not like you, he could easily call the police and denounce you for cursing Mohammed. It would then be your word against his. We were therefore consistently on the alert. Kidnapping was prevalent. There were many cases of burlap bags being thrown over the heads of Jewish children who disappeared and were never heard from again. I would protectively hold onto my younger brother's and sisters' hands until we were at school or back home. Everyday going to and from school was an ordeal.

When my mother married my father, Ezra Akerib, he was a wealthy produce exporter. During World War I, while the British were bombing Basra, my father's ships were destroyed. Shortly afterwards, a fire consumed his warehouse. He was never able to prove it was sabotage. In order to pay his creditors, my father was forced to sell all his assets, including all of my mother's jewelry. Financially depleted, we moved from Basra to Baghdad, leaving behind my mother's family. My father died when I was six.

Although Jews made up a large section of the Iraqi middle class—many were lawyers, doctors, judges, merchants, bankers, and economic advisers—we were destitute. If not for the support of my eldest brother Edmund and a wealthy aunt living in the Baghdad district of Senak, I don't

know how we would have survived.

Our house consisted of a tiny kitchen, five bedrooms, and a living room surrounding an open courtyard. We had dirt floors and no electricity. The kitchen had one tap and an open coal pit where my mother would cook rice and potatoes, our staples, that also included goat cheese, peanut butter, and bread. She suffered more than all of us. She went from being a wealthy lady with servants and a carriage to a woman forced to wash her family's clothes by hand in a pot on the roof of the house.

However, to me my mother was the repository of our traditions. She would sing us the songs and tell us the stories of our heritage—stories of Eliyahu HaNavi and countless other Torah personalities. She had the answers to all my questions.

My mother also taught us the meaning of *eib*—shame: that one should never do something shameful. Even today, when I am tempted to act in questionable ways, I remember that word and my mother's voice, and I refrain.

The education I received from my mother bound me to my Jewish heritage. When Zionism was prohibited in 1935, the Hebrew language was outlawed, except for Torah studies. There were no yeshivos *per se* in Baghdad. My brothers and I would attend *cheder* for one hour a day after school. We would learn to recite the Torah directly from the Torah scroll. The intention was pragmatic—to teach us to read from the Torah in the synagogue. No higher education was offered. There were those who studied Torah privately in the synagogue, but to qualify one had to pay. My family's situation made my participation impossible. For this same reason, I did not have a bar-mitzvah or put on *tefillin* until I was in my twenties and living in Israel. Given our illustrious heritage—having produced the Talmud Bavli and, as such, redefined Jewish identity in exile—



Sabih Ezra Akerib also known as Steven Acre in his youth and today

this was deplorable.

As an impoverished child, there were few activities with which to occupy myself. So I created my own entertainment. One of my hobbies was capturing pigeons and training them as homing pigeons. I would shorten the feathers on one wing to keep the pigeons from flying away, and then feed them rice and water. After the feathers grew back, they would always fly back to be fed. In time, there were 40 pigeons residing on our roof.

Another activity was kite running. My kite had a cord 100 meters long with tiny bits of glass glued onto it. When I flew my kite, it would cut the cords of other kites, turning them loose. At night, my kite would be tied to the little iron bed that was put on the roof during the summer months. When I awoke in the morning and saw that it was still there—that it hadn't been cut by others—I considered that a great victory.

In some strange way, these activities became symbolic in my mind of the contrasting attitudes that characterized Iraqi

Jews after the *Farhud* was over. Everyone who could afford to do so immediately secured a passport. Many people, however, chose not to leave. To me, these were the homing pigeons, programmed, as it were, to always return home for rice and water. Others, like me, who could not afford passports were like kites, seeking victory over those plotting to cut us down while longing to break loose.

Why did the *Farhud* happen? It likely resulted from a deadly combination of historical Jew-hatred and viciously anti-Zionist and anti-British sentiment—all inextricably intertwined.

Britain's stance in support of a national homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine was a factor that cannot be overstated. As an ardent Arab nationalist and virulent anti-Zionist and anti-Semite, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem was personally responsible for instigating revolts and violent pogroms against the Jewish populations of Palestine, and would later establish a close alliance with Adolf Hitler. Rumors replete with Jewish conspiracy theories, sown by

the Mufti himself, constantly reached Iraq. Iraqi Jews, one-third of Baghdad's population, proclaimed their steadfast allegiance to Iraq by publicly denouncing Zionism.

Yet, more than Zionism, anger was simultaneously being directed at British colonialist presumption and perceived arrogance, especially with regard to Iraqi oil reserves that Britain expropriated. When Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, initiating World War II, many Arabs, headed by the Mufti, turned to Hitler and the Nazi Party as the answer to both these issues.

As a young boy, I was unaware of the undercurrents of Muslim contempt of the Allies and their pathetic presumption that the Germans would be better. All I can assume is that hatred of both the Jews and the British blinded them to the reality of the Germans and their primal contempt for all Semitic peoples, including the Arabs themselves.

I was born in 1932, the year when Britain's Mandate officially ended and Iraq acquired nominal independence. Ironically, immediately after signing the League



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of Nations' Protection of Minorities Declaration, Iraq unleashed a barrage of violence against its minorities—first against the Assyrian Christians and then against the Jews.

That same year, Fritz Grobba, Germany's *charge d'affaires*, arrived in Baghdad and immediately began publishing installments of an Arabic translation of *Mein Kampf* in a Christian Iraqi newspaper. Significantly, all references to "anti-Semitism" were replaced by the words "anti-Jewish." In this way, the Nazi ideology of Jewish conspiracy and international manipulation infiltrated Iraqi society. In marketplaces, flyers were posted proclaiming: "In heaven, Allah is your master. On earth, it is Adolf Hitler."

The consequences for the Jews were severe. Minor government job losses quickly escalated to bombs and grenades being thrown at synagogues and Jewish schools. Following King Ghazi's death in 1941, a coup led by the "Golden Square"—four fiercely nationalistic and militantly anti-British Sunni military men—and by pro-Nazi Rashid Ali al-Gilani, attempted to overthrow the Iraqi royal family. The British hastily spirited away the five-year-old King Faisal II and his regent, Prince al-Ilah, to Jordan. Their absence enabled Rashid Ali to establish himself as prime minister. To add to the turmoil, the Mufti escaped house arrest in Beirut and settled in Iraq. The stage was now set to transplant Hitler's solution to the "Jewish problem" to Iraq and the Middle East.

Hitler was acutely aware of his country's

need for oil. He therefore had his eye on Iranian and Iraqi oil, whose pipelines ran through Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. This need, combined with anti-Jewish animus, explained Hitler's willingness to join with the Mufti and Muslim nationalists. Given that Iraq had declared "absolute neutrality" during the war, chances were strong that these oil fields were not guaranteed to Britain and France, and that the Nazi war machine would gain access to them. This access would have been catastrophic to the Allies' war efforts.

Matters came to a head between Britain, Iraq, and the Third Reich at Habbaniyah, a British army base near Fallujah, Iraq. Fearing Hitler's acquisition of the oil fields, Britain was determined to destroy them. Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Ali was determined to prevent Britain from doing so. On May 2, Iraqi troops breached Habbaniyah, and fierce air battles broke out between British and Iraqi troops.

At first, the British were vastly outnumbered and barely hung on. Hitler declared support for Iraq and sent in German fighter planes bearing Iraqi insignia. Fearing the worst, London issued orders to destroy the oil fields and pipelines. Before doing so, however, British troops suddenly began gaining ground. Once Habbaniyah, the British land troops consisting of Jewish soldiers and loyalist Arabs, moved in, the Iraqis were roundly defeated, leaving the oil fields intact. The British troops then hurried back to Baghdad with the intention of reinstating the king and his regent. Terrified of rumored British reprisals,

Rashid Ali and the Mufti abandoned Iraq on May 29 and stole across the border to Iran.

The plan to annihilate Baghdad's Jews had been put into place weeks earlier. On May 28, self-appointed governor al-Sabawi summoned Baghdad Chief Rabbi Sassoon Kadoori and ordered him to instruct the Jews to lock themselves in their houses for three days and prepare for deportation to detention centers. But there were no detention centers. In reality, we Jews had already been marked for extermination days before, when the red *hamsa* had first appeared. Keeping us inside our homes would assure our annihilation.

Stunned, Chief Rabbi Kadoori, together with other leading members of our community, immediately requested an audience with Baghdad mayor Arshad Umari. When he entered the room, Rabbi Kadoori dramatically threw his turban on the floor as a sign of deep consternation. After explaining the situation, Rabbi Kadoori begged Umari to intercede. Umari picked up and returned Kadoori's turban, assuring him all would be well.

On May 29, Umari rescinded al-Sabawi's powers and paid him to leave the country. The following day Umari assumed control of Baghdad. Contrary to plan, no radio announcements calling for the extermination of the Jews were made. Instead, it was announced on May 31 that the regent would be returning to Iraq the following day. The Jews heaved a collective sigh of relief.

Since June 1 was Shavuot, many Jews had been up all night studying Torah. Dressed in their festive clothing, they went out to greet the regent, Prince Abd al-Ilah, on his way to the palace. However, as this group approached the al-Kurr bridge, they met soldiers returning from their dismal defeat at Habbaniyah. The sight of the Jews sparked a frenzied, murderous response,

and the Jews were viciously attacked with knives and axes. This spontaneous assault instigated the barbarism that would become known as the *Farhud*, the plans for which had been in place weeks earlier.

While Baghdad's Jews were being hacked to death, the British remained camped a mere eight miles outside the city. Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, disregarding an express order from Winston Churchill to secure the city, refused to move in. Instead, as Jewish communities burned and Jews perished, he went back to his residence, had a candlelit dinner, and played a game of bridge.

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We never found out what the total body count was. Some sources claim it was 180 Jews. The Israeli-based Babylonian Heritage Museum avers that an additional 600 unidentified Jews were buried in a mass grave. Our Jewish establishment wanted to keep things as quiet as possible. How we continued to go on after that, I don't know. I could see hatred in the eyes of the Muslims as I walked the streets. Their eyes told me: "We were not successful this time—but there will be a next."

It was apparent to all of us that we needed to protect ourselves. Given the persistence of the Palestine issue, we

were terrified that another *Farhud* would erupt—and that this time there might not be another Arshad Umari to back us.

In 1942, the underground movement named The Babylonian Pioneer Movement was founded. We referred to it simply as *Tenuah* (Movement). Hundreds of young Jewish boys joined. At 16, I was among them.

At this point, our family had moved to a more modern house in the quieter Kar-rada district. One day, Alfred Somekh from *Tenuah* arrived and helped me build a "slick"—a dug-out under the floor tiles that contained a container in which he placed six hand grenades and a revolver with 30 rounds of bullets. The tiles covering the slick hid it. I was taught how to use these weapons.

This was in April 1948, and the State of Israel was on the verge of becoming a reality. The government began recruiting volunteers to go to Israel to kill Jews, for which they offered 15 pounds a month. I was left alone to watch over my mother and sisters. "What if I should run out of ammunition?" I asked my brother Edmund. He ominously answered, "Rather than allow our mother and sisters to be assaulted and mutilated, you will know what to do." From all my memories, that is the hardest to bear. Thank G-d, I never needed to use those weapons.

On my third try, together with my older brother Joseph and 14 other boys aged 16 to 24, I finally escaped Iraq. We spent that first night at my aunt's house in Basra. The next morning, an Arab driver came to take us to the Iranian border.

He never got us there, abandoning us midway. We had no choice but to move forward on our own, going eastward, following the stars. We walked by night and slept by day. We had only dates to eat.

We were fortunate enough to encounter Arab farmers who housed us and fed us in exchange for gold coins. After two days, they placed us in long, narrow boats and covered us with tarpaulins and hay. The river was infested with sharks. We recited *Shema Yisrael* the entire way to Iran.

When we finally reached the Iranian border, *Tenuah* representatives took us to a Jewish home in Abadan, where we stayed for a week. Then we took a train to Teheran. It was October, and a snowstorm was raging. It was the first time I had ever seen snow.

In Teheran we were brought to the Jewish cemetery at the outskirts of town, where hundreds of tents had been set up. Thousands of young Iraqi boys from Mosul, Basra, and Baghdad were already there. Two months later we boarded planes for Israel. For us, 2,600 years of Jewish Iraqi existence had come to an end. ●

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