

"THE LOST TRIBES OF ISRAEL"

A SURVEY OF THE REMAINING JEWS LIVING IN THE YEMEN

1. The Yemenite Jew must be the most interesting of all ethnic and religious minorities and being the oldest community in the Diaspora, hence the most ancient community existing outside Israel today. During a stay in the northern Yemeni town of Sa'ada in May this year, I was able to witness and observe at first hand the way of life of the few remaining Jews still living in the vicinity, once the centre of a very large Jewish settlement. The following notes may be of some interest, particularly at a time when there are indications that the Israelis are themselves showing an interest in the possibility of removing these remaining Jews to Israel. The German Ambassador in Sana'a told me in strict confidence that both he and his Italian colleague had been instructed by their respective governments to carry out a survey of the situation at the request of the Israelis. The Ambassador commented that they had very little knowledge concerning the remaining Jews in the Yemen, or even the number concerned, since travellers to those parts of Yemen where there were still thought to be communities were rare.

Background

2. Jews are known to have existed in Southern Arabia in the centuries before Islam, but it is not certain when or how they arrived. A popular theory is that the first Jews arrived in Yemen in the Tenth Century BC as followers in the train of the Queen of Sheba returning from Jerusalem. The Bible tells us that after "King Solomon gave unto the Queen of Sheba all her desire she turned and went to her own country, she and her servants". (1 Kings X.13) It would be reasonable to suppose that others joined in the wake of her party. Others argue that they arrived in the commercial and naval enterprises of Solomon and his ally, Hiram, King of Tyre to Ophir (usually acknowledged to be modern Yemen), which took place at the same time. "And Hiram sent in the navy his servants, shipmen that had knowledge of the sea, with the servants of Solomon. And they came to Ophir" (1 Kings IX, 27 & 28). The Yemenite Jews themselves hold the legend that their ancestors fled Jerusalem during the invasion of Judaea by Nebuchadnezzar, after the warning by the prophet Jeremiah of the forthcoming destruction of the temple. "He that remaineth in this city shall die by the sword, by the famine and by the pestilence: but he that goeth forth shall live". (Jeremiah XXXVIII.2) The Yemenites maintain that 75,000 Jews crossed the Jordan, retracing the steps of Moses and making for the desert. But when they came to Edom they turned south and continued on their way until they reached the mountains of Arabia, where they permanently established their homes. The

fertility of the soil, the salubrity of the climate and picturesqueness of the scenery caused the colony to increase and attract new immigrants; a circumstance the modern traveller to Yemen can well understand. The legend continues that when Cyrus, King of Persia, liberated the Jews from captivity in Babylon and instructed all Jews in exile to return to Jerusalem to re-build the temple, Ezra the priest was entrusted with the task of ensuring that all such Jews returned. But the Jews who had settled in Yemen refused to go back, arguing that the Lord, in reward for their having taken the advice of the prophet Jeremiah, had transferred a strip of the Holy Land to Sana'a, where it was producing fruit akin to that of Judaea. They maintained that Sana'a, where the majority had settled, was now almost as holy as Jerusalem. Also, they feared that the second temple would be destroyed like the first and the Jews driven into exile once more, so they considered it more expedient to remain where they were. Ezra, we are told, was not impressed by these arguments and placed upon the Jews of Yemen a curse that their days henceforth would be troubled, since they had chosen a comfortable exile to the discomfort of redemption. Later, when the introduction of Islam altered their material position and status in Yemen, and under a succession of Imams they suffered varying degrees of persecution, they attributed their sufferings to this original sin. In a show of revenge the Yemeni Jews have refrained from naming their children Ezra.

3. It is necessary to bear with this introduction to fully appreciate the fascination of finding Jewish communities, directly descended from the original Jewish emigrés, still living in remote parts of the Yemen to this day. Perhaps in no country have they preserved more their nationality and religion, even though for centuries surrounded by, at times hostile, Muslim tribes. Over the years stories have reached the outside world from travellers to Yemen of the conditions in which these, reportedly oppressed, communities lived. The famous Danish explorer, Carsten Niebuhr, was the first European to discover them in 1762. In 1859, Jacob Saphir, a Jerusalem rabbi, came to the Yemen to look for the 'ten lost tribes', and in 1866 published a two volumed account of the Yemen Jews. He was followed by the French Jew, Joseph Halevy in 1870, accompanied in his travels by a local Yemenite Jew, Hayim Habashush, and subsequently by the Viennese Jew Eduard Glaser from 1882-92. All conveyed a picture of gloom and depression so far as the Jews were concerned. Since then a number of lesser explorers have reported similarly, sometimes rather dramatically, on the conditions in which they found these Jewish communities. But these latter were mostly travellers to the Southern Shafai areas of Yemen, where the Jews are known to have fared far worse than under the protection of the Zeidis in the north, who showed not only more religious tolerance, but also appreciation of the artisan skills which the Jews have traditionally practised in Yemen.

Emigration

4. The first migration of any consequence of Yemenite Jews' reached Palestine in 1881-2, two years after the first pioneers from Russia, as an indirect consequence of the efforts of Laurence Oliphant in Constantinople who was seeking the then Sultan's permission for a settlement of Jews in Palestine. Some 500 eventually reached the 'Promised Land' travelling initially overland to the ports of Hodcida and Jedda before continuing up the Red Sea by boat. By 1907 nearly 3,000 Jews had left Yemen. Another 1,500 followed the first Zionist missionary, Samuel Yavnieli, back to Palestine in 1911. The first world war put a stop to further emigration until between 1927-31, when 1,200 emigrés made their way to Palestine; from 1933-35 over 4,000; from 1936-38, 1,104; in 1939, 90 emigrated; in 1940, 80; in 1941, 51 and between 1942 to 1944, 3,000. By the time the state of Israel was proclaimed in 1948, it is estimated that the Yemeni communities there totalled 35,000. Most of the latter had made their way first down to Aden before taking a ship up the Red Sea. All this despite the fact that since 1921 the Imam Yahia had ordered that any Jews who left Yemen should have their property confiscated, and in 1929 he forbade Jewish emigration altogether. In 1948 the Imam Yahia was murdered and in the hope that his successor Ahmed might take a more lenient view on Jewish emigration, a final exodus was planned in the years 1949-50. The pressure for emigration had been heightened somewhat by a malicious and unlikely story in early 1948, that some Jews in Sana'a had murdered two Arab girls in a ritual and thrown their bodies into a well. A consequence of this was a campaign of violence against the Jewish community in the city. In the event some 50,000 Jews emigrated from Yemen in these two years in an operation, known as 'Magic Carpet', co-ordinated by the authorities in Israel, the United States (who provided the airlift from Aden), and the British in Aden. The Yemenis have not lost the opportunity of quoting the words of the biblical prophecy, the more apt coming so soon after the first Israeli war, "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle's wings, and brought you unto myself." (Exodus XIX.4). It was uncertain at the time as to how many Jews if any, might have remained stranded in various isolated parts, but the Israelis usually referred to the operation as "a total evacuation of Jewry from Yemen". The subject seems to have been entirely forgotten until during the Civil War in Yemen from 1962-70, with much of the fighting being in the North and the circumstances providing closer contacts between the Royalists fighting there and Western agencies, stories emerged of there still being remote Jewish settlements. It is with this somewhat lengthy, but I think necessary, background that I submit the following observations of the communities which I met during my recent visit.

The present day state of the remaining Jewish communities

5. The remaining Jewish settlements in Yemen are exclusively in the northern Zaidi areas, who have traditionally shown more tolerance to the Jewish settlers than the Shafai's in the South. I discovered no evidence of any Jews remaining in the South (there were large numbers there before 1949) other than a passing reference to a merchant family in Ibb, the truth of which I was unable to verify. The Jewish settlements are divided geographically into the Yahoud Al Maghrib (Western Jews) and the Yahoud Al Mashraq (Eastern Jews). They refer amongst themselves to this distinction although the division is purely geographical and in no way tribal or cultural.

a) Yahoud Al Maghrib

<u>Beit</u>	<u>Number of male adults</u>	<u>Area</u>
Beit Suleiman Ibn Yahia Habib	15	Sa'ada) (Gharaz and
Beit Yahia Saad Al Bouni	6	Sa'ada) Dimaj)
Beit Ghedari	15	Khawlaan Ibn Amir (extreme North West Yemen)
Beit Al Khubaani	10	Saiqayn
Beit Al Qarhash	5	Saiqayn
Beit Al Khaalidi	4	Haidaan
Beit Al Qadabi	4	Haidaan
Beit Al Baradi	6	Haidaan
Beit Said Al Sabi	3	Haidaan
Beit Al Qarani	10	Raida
Beit Al Halla	20	Raida
Beit Al Nahari	30	Raida
Beit Al Na'adhi	40	Raida
Beit Al Ammar	10	Arhab
Beit Al Jaraadi	6	Arhab
Beit Al Frayin	6	Al Shagardira (West of Hajjah)
<u>Total</u>	<u>190</u>	

b) Yahoud Al Mashraq

Beit Sabari (Ailum Daoud Sabari)	200	Amlah
Beit Aal Said Zarib	15	Amlah
Beit Yussif Ibn Mussa	20	Gharcer
Beit Salim Asr, Aal Abu Jabara	15	Wadi Aal Abu Jabara, Kitaf
Beit Salim Said Mughwaan	10	Kitaf
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	<u>Total</u>	260
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These figures total 450 adult male Jews. To arrive at a grand total to include both women and children we might assume that three out of five such adults are married with a family of three or four. One such group questioned who gave the figure of 15 adult males said they totalled 35, but this seems on the low side. A fair estimate then of the total number of Jews remaining in Yemen would be between 1,400-1,700. However this figure probably tends well on the conservative, since I may not have a complete list of Beits. But so far as I am aware this is the first attempt to assess the numbers with any accuracy.

Relations between Arab and Jew

6. From all the evidence I saw, Arab and Jew live together in perfect harmony. There is a regular social intercourse between the two races. In the houses that I visited we entered upon Jews and Arabs sitting together in Majlis. The Jews are as addicted to the habit of chewing qat as the Arabs and communal 'qat sessions' are common. I sat through several. The Jews are marked as being more generous and hospitable than the Arab, a fact recognised by the latter who call in upon the Jews of an evening more often than vice versa. Inter-marriage between the two communities is rare but not unknown. No Jew may take a Muslim girl unless he himself converts to Islam, only one case of which was on record in the area in the last ten years. More often however an Arab marries a Jewish girl, it being necessary of course that she embraces Islam. The conversions are performed by the local Qadhi without undue ceremony. Seven such cases were quoted to me as having occurred in the area during the past ten years or so.

7. During the civil war and the presence of the Egyptian army in the north of Yemen, many of the Jews, fearing reprisals from the soldiery, took refuge amongst their brethren of the Yahoud Al Mashraq, whose areas were under Royalist control and who gave them full protection. Many were employed as cooks for the Royalist forces in the field particularly around Amlah. This may account for the high proportion of Jews still

living in that area. When they returned to their homes, after the Egyptians had withdrawn, they found them intact and untouched by the Arabs. During the reigns of the Imams Yahia and Ahmed, the Jews were supposedly not to build houses of more than two stories so as not to look down upon the houses of their Arab neighbours. Whilst that may have been enforced at the time it is no longer true in the north. I stayed a night in a Jewish house at Dimaj near Sa'ada and sleeping on the roof of a four storied building I observed in the morning that ours was as high as all the others in the village. There are no longer any Jews living in the old walled town of Sa'ada itself, the two nearest communities being in the nearby villages of Gharaz and Dimaj; but houses inside the town are still owned by Jews who are thus landlords to the Arabs living in them. The houses that I visited whilst frugal and small were on the whole cleaner and better organised than comparable Arab houses.

Religion and customs

8. The Jews are allowed to practise their religion with complete freedom. Prior to the exodus of 1949-50 there were separate synagogues in many of the towns where there were large communities. Now however the small numbers do not warrant the upkeep of an independent communal place of worship and religious services are held inside their houses. A synagogue is still believed to be in use at Saiqayn and possibly at Amlah where there is the largest community. The Sabbath is most religiously and strictly kept, and a Jew is rarely even seen outside his house on a Saturday. They change into clean clothing for this day. Jewish feast days and the periods of fasting are scrupulously observed, and the Jewish calendar is used rather than the Hijra. Each family has its bible in Hebrew, usually a well thumbed leather bound volume. One that I saw had the unlikely inscription in the back "Printed in Poland - 1930". The scarcity of Hebrew bibles is now a cause of some concern. Previously, when there were Jews in Aden, they obtained a regular supply from there, but now all outside supply of Hebrew books has stopped and there is an acute shortage. An example of the complete religious tolerance and freedom that I found is illustrated by the fact that I asked one bearded patriarch to read from the bible in Hebrew. He subsequently translated it into Arabic and the Arabs present nodded in affirmation of the wisdom therein. The leaders of the community are known as Aiylooms, an honorific which seems to correspond to Shaikh. Circumcision of the boys is carried out on the eighth day after birth, a custom similar to that of the Arabs in the area. Polygamy seems common. Names used for the men are mostly similar to the Arabs except that of course Muhammad and its derivatives are not used and in addition Dacud and Yahouda are common. The most common names for Jewesses are Walla, Ghusna, Zahra, Zuhra and Saara.

Education

9. The children are educated at home and never sent to Arab schools, which in any case are mostly Koranic in this area. (It is possible that the larger communities have schools of their own.) The teaching of the Hebrew script and the bible has been handed down for literally hundreds of generations with no infusion of fresh learning from outside. Literacy amongst the Jewish males is possibly total since great efforts are made to instil learning into Jewish boys from an early age. Amongst the Arabs of course, the percentage is low.

Appearance and Dress

10. It has previously been chronicalled that the Yemenite Jew and Arab are identical in features. I did not find this so, many of the Jews appearing to have strikingly handsome and classically fine boned features with smoother complexions. This was particularly noticeable in the teenage boys. All Jews invariably affect the shoulder length plaited side locks, often shaving the remainder of the head. The women, who are unveiled and mix freely in male company, are likewise strikingly attractive and keep their figures and smooth skin after bearing children in a way the Arab women must envy. Since there has been very little mixing of blood within the Jewish stock, although there were early converts to Judaism, they must be a remarkably pure race and their features immediately indicate this. In dress Arab and Jew are similar. I saw no Jews wearing the traditional black skull cap; most have adopted the coloured kuffiya of the Arabs, but they do not wrap a turban around it, except occasionally in a loose fashion.

Employment

11. The Jews are mostly employed in artisan trades such as silversmiths, shoemakers, lattice and alabaster window dressers, and masons. Previously they worked the iron mines around Sa'ada, evidence of which can still be seen at the Southern end of the walled town itself. A few are shopkeepers or agricultural smallholders in the same way as the Arabs. Wine making is still a semi-illicit trade carried on by the Jews, this being particularly so in the Sa'ada area which is famous throughout Yemen for its rich grapes. They are purveyors of wine to the Arabs, a practice frowned upon but rampant. On one occasion when I returned back to Sa'ada with some Arabs after spending a night in a Jewish house in a neighbouring suburb, my Arab companions were anxious to slip back into the town without being spotted, not from any feared criticism of racial intermixing, but lest they be accused of a night of loose living.

Contact with other Jewish communities

12. Since the mass exodus in 1949-50, the remaining Jews in Yemen have had practically no contact with those that emigrated to Israel. Letters through the open post are clearly impossible and letters by the hand of travellers rare indeed. Since the Yemeni Jew never travels abroad with the intention of returning, his contact with the outside world is minimal. In this of course he differs greatly from the Yemeni Arab who are amongst the world's greatest travellers, and nearly any village in Yemen will contain those who have lived in Moscow, Tiflis, Birmingham (Alabama or Warwickshire) or Peking. Within their own communities however there is a regular exchange of visitors and gatherings for births, deaths and marriages, with a full knowledge of the affairs and happenings of other communities. There is an esprit de corps, created by any racial minority. There are no longer any Jews living in Sana'a, but there is nothing to prevent a Jew from the north visiting the capital. I met one such who had done so only a fortnight previously, travelling in one direction by road and the other by air.

Restricted privileges

13. Whilst the foregoing might suggest that the Jew in Yemen is on an entirely equal footing with his Arab cousin, and indeed my impressions were more towards that direction than I would have previously thought, there are a number of restricted privileges still in being, although the Yemeni Jew will tell you his lot is very much better under the Republic than in the days of the Imams. The following are the main restrictions which makes him something less than a first class citizen.

- a) No Jew is allowed to interfere in or influence the politics of the country in any way.
- b) No Jew may enter government service or serve in the Army or Militia.
- c) No Jew may be named as a surety or guarantor, not even for one of his own kind.
- d) No Jew is allowed to carry arms (in practice many carry a revolver for self defence) or wear a dagger, although the Jews of the Sa'ada area, traditionally and uniquely, sometimes wear the empty sheath.

However most of the previous restrictions as decreed by Imam Yahya in 1906 have fallen into abeyance. These included privations such that no Jew might:-

- a) "Discuss religion with Moslems" (I have already indicated that this is not so).

/b)

- b) "Ride an animal cross saddle" (I have seen Jews, and have photographs of them, riding astride donkeys in the streets of Sa'ada).
- c) "Touch a Muslim passing on his way" (Jews affect the same salutations, handshakes and other bodily gestures with Arabs as the latter do amongst themselves).
- d) "Sound the ram's horn loudly or laugh or make remarks at the sight of a naked Muslim" (I cannot claim a first hand account of proving that either of these restrictions have been revoked).

The future of the Yemenite Jew

14. Whatever might be the intentions of the Israeli government, every Jew I spoke to made it quite clear he had no wish to emigrate to Israel, nor do the Arabs wish them to go. The Jews regard themselves first and foremost as Yemenis and claim, with some justification as we have seen, that they were practising their religion in Arabia Felix before the Arab his. Indeed there is a saying in the Yemen, quoted to me in fact by an Arab that "only the Jews are the true Yemenis". Arab and Jew alike, to whom I talked, were critical of Imam Ahmed for allowing the 1949-50 exodus. Apart from all else it deprived the country of badly needed artisan skills. Another Yemeni proverb has it that "there is no prosperous town in Yemen unless there are Jews living there". Although we are given to understand that the Imam Ahmed allowed those who wished to leave to do so without hindrance, the impression I received in northern Yemen was that the Imam's officials "strongly persuaded" all the Jews to leave, and once the exodus had started it became a sort of rout. Those that remained either did so by going into hiding or by heavily bribing the Imam's officials to allow them to stay. One Jew told me that his father had had to pay two thousand Maria Theresa dollars, his life's savings, in order to stay put with his family. The Yemenite Jew will tell you that this is his country in which generations of his forefathers have lived and he is quite content with his lot. Only one Jew I spoke to suggested, with a wistful smile, that it might be a better life in the "Promised Land". But this only in a way in which thousands of Britons threaten to migrate to Australia, with the image of a life of sea and sun, after a severe budget has been announced. In general the Yemenite Jew is infinitely more content with his lot than his Arab counterpart, who constantly complains of the inadequacies of the central government and compares the backwardness of his country to America or Europe. This of course is no doubt mainly because so many Yemeni Arabs have sought their early living or education abroad and returned home to step back several centuries; the Jew has never stepped out. There is, so far as I know, nothing to prevent the Yemenite Jew from leaving Yemen individually should he wish to do so. And the fact that he is not seems in itself evidence of their contentment.

15. I began this paper by mentioning that the German Ambassador in Sana'a had been instructed to do a survey of the very position on which I hope I have shed some light. From the slender knowledge which he admits he already has, he draws the same conclusions as I do, ie that from a humanitarian view point it would be tragic to uproot these contented people to a country where we are currently hearing of racial gang fights in which the oriental Jew is involved. But there are additionally the delicate complications that any influx of Jews into Israel will provoke. Since it is inconceivable that the Israelis could negotiate another "Magic Carpet" direct with the Yemenis, Western missions would presumably be, or be believed to be, involved, and a situation might easily be created where the Arab seeing some Western inspired Zionist plot could turn against the Jew, upsetting the present very satisfactory state of relations. It would be best for all to leave well alone.

16. I attach a selection of photographs of Yemenite Jews in the Sa'ada area.

H R Leach
20 June 1971

BRITISH EMBASSY
JEDDA