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The JEWISH VETERAN

JEWISH WAR VETERANS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



In this issue...

SYRIA'S JEWISH COMMUNITY
by a special correspondent



Commander Ben Chasin and Secretary of the Army Wilbur Brucker, in the latter's Pentagon office examining the new U.S. Army flag.

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Syria's Jewish Community

by a SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

THE years between 1920 and 1948 saw a prospering Syrian Jewish community of some 30,000 members many of whom held key-positions of the country's economic arteries and played important roles in Syria's cultural, administrative and industrial progress.

Leon Soares, the famous French industrialist of Jewish origin had been largely responsible for the building of the Damascus-Aleppo railway line even before the first world war.

In 1923 the Bank Cattaoui Bey (now the National Bank of Syria) with its 18 branches was founded by two Egyptian Jewish financiers, the brothers Rene and Aslan Cattaoui Bey.

Another Egyptian Jew, owner and editor of the Cairo French daily "La Liberte" founded the Syrian French daily "L'Orient" which is still in circulation though not owned by him any more.

Almost all chairs in the University of Damascus (also founded in 1923) were held by European Jews: Medicine, Prof. Moses Allerstein from Germany; Pharmaceutics, Prof. Walter Herzberg from Switzerland; Dental Surgery, Dr. Jacob Wilson from England; Law, Dr. Louis Lombard from France.

Most of the Catering, Industry of Tourism, Traffic and Foreign Trade were either in Jewish hands or largely sponsored and promoted on a Foreign Investments basis by Jews who were not residents of Syria.

With Syria's independence granted in 1944, the French withdrew, leaving in the State Administration a vacuum which could not be adequately filled by the (then) comparatively backward natives; and thus a still greater influx of Jews overtook Damascus (mainly people from European countries with predominantly French background) and a considerable number of Government positions were handed over to them.

In spite of the overall malignant attitude of the Moslem layman, who thought himself pushed back and away from his just achieved independence, the authorities, realizing the significance of the Jewish cultural stratum in Syria, treated the Jewish population with uttermost leniency, and genuine friendliness and thus, it seemed, Syria's Jewry was striking deep roots.

It could have been so if this community had not become a victim of the rapid political conflicts in recent years and of its own dissenuous entanglement of social relationship.

At first glance the Syrian Jewry could have passed as a highly flourishing community. Most of its members were wealthy. Religious life was conducted with zeal and zest. The Damascus Jewry erected a splendid Bet Kehilah with a thereto attached Yeshivah. The Aleppo Jews followed their example with a still more splendid new Bet Kehilah and established a Hebrew day-school. Even a communal paper, "La Revue Juive", was founded in Aleppo but died after three months of struggling.

The Aleppo community established a Jewish library which contained over 12,000 volumes in French, English, Hebrew, German and Spanish—covering almost every subject to be found in any of the European communal libraries. Charitable activities were well organized and cared for the few Jewish orphans and poor who were well accommodated and well provided with all needs.

Yet if looked at from the purely Jewish social point of view, Syria's Jewry consisted of three absolutely separate, almost hostile camps: some 18,000 Sephardi Jews, largely in the Import-Export business and in industry, were located mainly in the towns of Latakia, Homs and the bulk in Aleppo. They looked upon the 8,000 Ashkenazi Jews (who were centered mainly in the Damascus district) as unwanted newcomers, half-assimilated intruders, refugees and careerists. These in return looked at the Sephardi Jews as an unfriendly unhospitable group of snobs who were more

harming than aiding the future relationship between Moslems and Jews in Syria; the social intercourse between these two groups was practically nil.

So highly discriminative an attitude towards each other drove these two communities into seclusion; and what's more, it made them turn their back on the already secluded, smallest and probably most original part of Syrian Jewry: some 4,000 Jewish felaheen—farmers—who were sneered at, regarded by the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim alike as the "lower class" not to be associated with or even warned of danger; the "untouchables" who were left behind uninformed and abandoned to become what they are today—a Jewish community that hates Israel.

When the State of Israel was proclaimed the wealthy bulk of Syrian Jewry took advantage of the upheaval caused by Col. Husni Zaim's 1st coup de'etat which postponed the conclusion of the armistice with Israel until 20th July 1949, and left Syria: the Ashkenazi Jews returned to Europe where they originated (mainly France and Britain) and the Sephardim crossed the border and settled in the Lebanon where they had already transferred most of their assets.

This rapid mass-escape of the Syrian Jews caught the authorities unawares and after the armistice with Israel was concluded and things calmed down a little, the Government's attention was drawn by the vacuum which the two major Jewish

communities left behind—and by what was left of the once very conspicuous Syrian Jewry: a confused little lump of some 3,400 Jewish fellaheen—farmers with hardly any cultural background in the Western sense of the word; an uninformed little group of people whose hatred the Syrian propaganda managed to turn against Israel and who are now being held as a puppet body for Syria's representative purposes and probably also as hostages to whatever may come.

The Syrian Government thought it disadvantageous to have Jewish fellaheen near the Iraqi border, and thus they were forcibly uprooted from their lands in the al-Jazirrah region, with a promise to be returned thereto "when the gallant Syrian Army has vanquished the Zionist gangs"—a promise which resulted in an enthusiastic (and rejected) appeal by the younger fellaheen who are renowned for their courage and combat ability, to join the Syrian army and help destroy the cause of their misery. These Jews were finally "rehabilitated in the most slummy sector of the Arab Quarter in Damascus, and given the plushy-sounding title: "The Jewish Religious Council of Syria".

Representing the Council is 74-year-old Khakham Yedidyah Sahal (the only Rabbi in Syria) who is also "Treasurer of the Council", "Cultural Representative of the Council", "President of the Syrian Jewry", "Patron of the Damascus Synagogue", the only person of the Jewish community with

whom foreign visitors are permitted to speak, and last but not least, the Chief Rabbi of Syria who (in order to earn a meager living) runs in his home a dusky little "Kheder" for the handful of Jewish boys who are not forced to help their families in earning a living, who are not admitted to any other school and like the rest of the Jewish fellaheen regardless of age or sex, are confined to the limits of "The Jewish Quarter" as it is now called.

According to the vague information supplied by Khakham Yedidyah Sahal, the fellaheen are believed to have settled in the Jazirrah region shortly before the destruction of the First Temple and many of them claim to originate from the Kingdom of Israel. There is, of course, nothing that could support this assumption. Yet the Jewish fellaheen proudly insist on its being the truth.

Curiously enough, one does find among them a strikingly high percentage of the straight-nosed blue-eyed type, so rarely seen among the more secluded sections of Oriental population.

This coincidence (if such) makes one think of the assumption that the people of the Kingdom of Israel had straight noses and blue eyes, whereas it is the people of Jehuda that had acquired the Hittite nose as the guerdon of their commerce with Moab

Also their communal rules of matrimony (polygamy is still practiced if one can afford more than one wife) resemble some-