The Last Jews of Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland

Nissim Rejwan
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"It is all but impossible to pinpoint a date or an event with which the position of the Jews of Iraq began to deteriorate and take the course leading finally,

inevitably, to the destruction of community," writes Nissim Rejwan near the end of his memoir *The Last Jews of Baghdad* (p. 188). Yet their centuries-long presence was such that, as the author notes, for those Jews who were born and grew up in Baghdad before the mass exodus of 1950-51, the presence of a mere handful of elderly Jews in the city today is "a state of affairs [that] is hard to imagine" (p. 1). Rejwan's endearing memoir traces out a period of Iraqi history that saw the disappearance of a community that had been an integral part of the human map and the city's history. The author's youth, from his birth in 1926 to his irrevocable departure in 1952 for Israel, condemns him to what he refers to as a state of permanent unbelonging.

Rejwan was born in a Baghdad, where Jews were an indigenous, integrated community that participated fully in the city's sociocultural life. Although relations with Muslims and Christians may have been characterized by a certain aloofness due to the logic of custom and faith, Rejwan's portrayal of the Baghdad of his childhood is such that the spatial organization and interpenetration of the communities in the quotidian illustrate a city of shared economic struggles, neighborhood vernaculars, and an intermingling that came to life in "[t]he shouts … the endless disputations and arguments and the extremely juicy curses … [and] the encounters [that] were in the nature of veritable revelations" for the young author (p. 31). The paramountcy of marriage for his siblings, the negotiated dowries, and the interfamilial politics of social position and responsibility translate a world of intra-communal mores where life's rhythms were dictated by that which had come before.

Citing a British consular report, the author dispels the oft-held notion that Baghdad's Jews were uniformly wealthy, noting that there were as many Jewish beggars as merchants and bankers (p. 2). He situates his family as "belonging somewhere between the 30 percent of the middle class and the 60 percent poor, with periodic shifts between the two, mostly in the latter's direction" (p. 2). The constant penury, due to his father's blindness (and in a wonderful irony, we are invited into the synagogue and the arena of greater family arbitration by the foot-dragging adolescent who accompanies his father on errands of duty; we see this world through the father's blindness), dominates the author's childhood and adolescence with his family moving home, seemingly monthly, in an never-ending quest to keep up appearances.

His formative years coincide with the march of modernity and the processes of modernization. The penetration of outside influence took many forms as Iraq was thrust into the broader world: the poverty in the wake of the Great Crash, the arrival of the Alliance Israelite, the growing availabil-

ity of the Arab and European press, and the first forays of Zionism all attest to an unsettling of certainties. As he enters adolescence and then adulthood, during which he teaches himself to read English, his juvenile concerns pass to more elaborate, urbane pursuits. His European literary interests march in time to the incursion of geopolitical events into his Baghdadi world, with his odd jobs – shop assistant, bank clerk, and bookshop employee – subsidizing his interests in the intellectual currents of the day, currents contested among his intellectual peers in coffee-shop debates.

As a book and film reviewer for the English-language *Iraqi Times,* Rejwan has access to the latest press and periodical editions of the day, be they communist, socialist, or purely literary. He and his modernist cohorts, centered around the Al-Rabita Bookshop where he worked, favored a leftist explanatory model of the world. However, as a measure of the world's transformation, the gathering storm of Baghdadi politics would reveal darker movements, with anti-imperial sentiment influenced by a pro-Nazi agitation that often manifested itself in anti-Jewish violence. The author confesses that the harbingers of sinister events were felt personally in his belief that the sudden end of his tenure at the *Iraqi Times* was an unspoken act of anti-Semitism.

The demise of Baghdadi Jewry and its exile to Israel, Europe, and North America "was the end result of a process that had started on those two fateful days of June" (p. 131). These 1941 June days, referred to as the *farhud,* "shocked, terrorized and demoralized" the Jewish community, which witnessed police and state complicity in the violence directed toward it (p. 132). The 1947-48 war, Israeli independence, and the increasing harassment of Jews became the proverbial writing on the wall. The greater embrace of Zionism, an ideology, Rejwan argues, that was hard to reconcile with the level of Jewish integration into Baghdadi society, would trump attempts by some Jews to portray themselves as loyal citizens of Iraq.

Yet Rejwan is rarely more than ambivalent toward the Israel portrayed in Zionist militancy. His departure from Iraq is symbolized by the sale of his precious library, and his arrival in Israel by an unsolicited dusting of DDT. Both events would serve to highlight his exile and, more broadly, how Iraqi Jews and their Zionism would remain marginalized under the supremacy of Eastern European power and culture.

While not a history, as major political events are no more than a backdrop to the author's literary pursuits, these recollections coincide with a period of profound upheaval. As such, the reader is invited to appreciate how the customary certainties that had characterized the expectations of his par-

ents' generation became unable to explain the world and so were replaced by the convictions of new and often exclusionary identities. *The Last Jews of Baghdad* will interest general readers and academics alike, as it provides an engaging first-hand portrait of a life lived during a pivotal era in the Middle East. More significantly, Rejwan undermines the ideological certainties that often hid the complexity and intermingling of populations before the advent of more politically rigid identities.

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