



Café Baghdad Curriculum Packet

Café Baghdad tells a true story (based on the memoir of Naim Kattan) of four young Iraqi intellectuals in the 1920s in Baghdad. The group was comprised of Jews and Muslims alike who would meet regularly to discuss literature, plan their futures and debate the future of their country. On this particular evening, one of the Jewish characters decides to use the Jewish dialect of Arabic rather than the dominant Muslim one. In doing so, he raises questions about his position in society as an Iraqi and as a Jew and forces the narrator to consider his own identity.

This pack of resources is designed to guide teachers through a series of lessons and discussions about a variety of topics, all stemming from a lesson about the Iraqi Jewish experience. Teachers are encouraged to select ideas and activities from the collection that are applicable to their students, their curriculum, and their environment.

➤ **The Larger Context: Jews in Iraq**

Café Baghdad provides insight into the unique situation of Jews living in Iraq in the 1920s. In addition to listening to the audio clip of Café Baghdad, students will conduct activities to learn about the lives and experiences of other Iraqi Jews

➤ **The Larger Context: Jews in the Middle East and North Africa:**

Café Baghdad can be used as a case study to understand the complexity and diversity of Jewish experiences throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Students will consider the situation as it existed in Iraq and then conduct independent or group research on Jews in other areas of the Middle East and North Africa. Such a unit challenges the assumptions that hatred and conflict has always existed between Jews and Muslims and situates the current tensions between them in its historical context

➤ **The Larger Context: Minorities in the Middle East**

The Middle East is often portrayed as a homogenous region comprised of Arab Muslims. It is, however, an extremely diverse region with a range of religions and ethnicities. Café Baghdad can be used as a spring board for students to research other minorities in the region including the Copts, the Kurds, the Armenians, the Christians, and many more.

➤ **Exploring Identity**

Café Baghdad centers on the exploration of identity through linguistic markers. This is an excellent opportunity to encourage students to think about their own identities and how they are

characterized. In Iraq, identity is distinguished by language—how do we distinguish identity in our own society? Students are encouraged to consider when the characters self identify by religion and when they self identify by nationality; so too, students should consider when others impose a religious identity on the characters and when a national identity is imposed.

➤ **The Minority Experience**

Café Baghdad identifies the Jews as a minority group in Iraq and illustrates the challenges they face in that position. This audio clip provides an opportunity for teachers to discuss various minorities in our society and for students to consider the experience of being a minority.

Possible Enduring Understandings:

- There were/are engaged Jewish communities throughout the Middle East
- We all have multiple and sometimes conflicting identities and we can draw on different identities in different circumstances
- The significant challenges of being a minority are complex and manifest themselves in various ways

Possible Essential Questions:

- What was it like to be Jewish in Iraq in the 1920s?
- What was it like to be Jewish in the Middle East in the 1920s?
- What is identity and how is it identified, revealed, and manifested?
- What is it like to be a minority?

Suggested Activities:

Café Baghdad

- Listen to the audio clip
- Answer comprehension questions
- Answer discussion questions

Character Analysis

- Write diary entries for the different characters in the play
- Write a different ending for the story

The Larger Context: Jews in Iraq

- Read the biographies of other Iraqi Jews from jimema.org.
 - Write diary entries for these individuals



- Write a biography of an imaginary Jew in Iraq

The Larger Context: Jews in the Middle East

- Conduct research on Jews in other countries of the Middle East. Compare and contrast Jewish experiences around the Middle East

The Larger Context: Minorities in the Middle East

- Read about other minorities in the Middle East and compare them to the Jewish experience. Some examples include:
 - Bahais (Iran)
 - Zoroastrans (Iran)
 - Berbers (North Africa)
 - Christians (Lebanon)
 - Copts (Egypt)
 - Druze (Israel, Syria)
 - Kurds (Iraq, Turkey)
 - Armenians (Iraq, Turkey)

Exploring Identity

- Write an essay on “Who am I?”
- Make a visual representation of your identity

The Minority Experience

- This should be tailored to the minority communities in your area



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CAFE BAGHDAD

Have Arab coffee with a Jew in the New York City of the Middle East

Excerpted from Naim Kattan's Memoir Farewell Babylon: Coming of Age in Jewish Baghdad

Adapted and Directed by Sacha Reich
Performed by
Brian Allard, Doren Elias, Shuhe Hawkins and Aithan Shapira

SCRIPT

NA'IM The coffee pot had just gone around again and we were all holding cups of bitter coffee

NESSIM When Nessim made his entrance. His gestures were emphatic and exaggerated like those of a retired actor, but he put such elation into his words that he never gave the impression of being on stage.

NA'IM The discussion was lively that evening.

NASR Nasr could not contain his enthusiasm since he had started reading the American novelists. He urged the group to enroll in the school of Saroyan and Hemingway. It's the ideal every young Iraqi writer should be aiming at.

SA'ID Sai'd interrupted. He disagreed with Nasr. It was in our own rich past, in the great Arabic literary tradition, that we should seek our inspiration.

NASR But the Arabs haven't produced any novelists, said Nasr, who had just published a collection of short stories.

SA'ID What about the *Thousand and One Nights*?

NASR All right, but those are folktales that aren't really part of the literary tradition

NESSIM Don't wear yourself out, we know the rest, Nessim interjected. He had written an essay on Balzac and translated several of Maupassant's stories. *Here* are the models to follow.

NA'IM We got together at the Yassine Cafe every evening, making plans for the future based on our day's reading. It was an endless debate that we resumed night after night. We were painfully tracing our path, each of us seeking in the others' approval a confirmation of the dictates of his temperament; and under cover of discussing the future of our culture, we were defending our own first writing.

That evening was marked by an unusual note.

NESSIM Nessim spoke in the Jewish dialect.

NA'IM We were the only Jews in the group.

NASR All the others, except for a Caldean and an Armenian, were Muslim and their dialect served as our common language.

SA'ID In Iraq the presence of a single Muslim in a group was enough for his dialect to be imposed.

NA'IM But was it a true dialect? Every religious community had its manner of speaking. All of us - Jews, Christians or Muslims - spoke Arabic. We'd been neighbors for centuries. Our accents, certain words, were our distinguishing marks. Why did the Christians draw out certain words?

SA'ID We were told that in this way they were perpetuating the traces of their Northern origin.

NASR But then the Northern Muslims, those from Mosul, should have spoken like Christians.

NESSIM The Jewish manner of speaking was sprinkled with Hebrew words, explained by long familiarity with the Bible and prayers.

NA'IM But how to explain the presence of Turkish and Persian words in our dialect?

NESSIM We would have had greater contact with invaders and pilgrims than the Bedouins.

NASR What about the Muslims who, during the Ottoman era, were forced to learn not Arabic, but Turkish in school?



NA'IM We had only to open our mouths to reveal our identity. The emblem of our origins was inscribed in our speech. *We were Jew,*

SA'ID Christian

NASR and Muslim,

NESSIM from Baghdad,

SA'ID Basrah

NASR or Mosul.

NA'IM We had a common language,

SA'ID that of the Muslims of the region.

NESSIM Semi-literate Jews always studded their phrases with one or two Muslim terms when they spoke to other Jews. Borrowing a few words from the Muslims proved that one had dealings with them, that one associated with them and that one was not content with the poor company of other Jews. The rich Jews were no less ashamed of their accent and they never missed the chance to slip a few words of English or French into their conversation. A child who called his father papa or daddy was already guaranteed a future aristocracy.

SA'ID The Muslims borrowed only from literary language. They felt no need to cast an unfavorable judgment on their dialect.

NESSIM Turning to the dialects of Jews and Christians only to amuse visitors. A typically Jewish word in the mouth of a Muslim was synonymous with ridicule.

NA'IM In emancipated intellectual circles there was no thought of borrowing the Jewish accent

NASR and even less of making fun of it.

NESSIM It was unusual, then, for Nessim to speak in his own accent among so many Muslims.

NA'IM Was it another joke?

NESSIM No, he was not speaking exclusively to me.



NA'IM He was completely free to do so, despite the presence of the others.

NESSIM But he was not addressing me. He was not even looking at me. He was speaking to Nasr, SA'ID and the others.

NAZAR Everyone tacitly wanted to attribute this out burst of comic dialect to Nessim's bantering nature. It was of no consequence.

NESSIM Nessim persisted, straight faced.

NA'IM It was though he were taking special care to choose all the Jewish words that usually got a laugh from Muslims.

NESSIM Imperturbably, he pleaded Balzac's case and talked of his enthusiasm for Stendhal, whom he had just discovered.

NA'IM Like a coward, I chose silence.

NESSIM Still displaying all his enthusiasm for the French novel, Nessim called on me to participate.

Finally he asked me a question directly.

NA'IM It was useless for me to escape. He would persist.

I chose a middle course.

My words were neither those of the Jews nor the Muslims. I spoke in literary Arabic, the Arabic of the Koran.

NESSIM Then, in a supercilious tone and with contained anger, Nessim corrected me.

You mean and he translated into perfect Jewish dialect.

He compressed his lips in a gesture of hatred.



He exaggerated our accent.

NA'IM I could see in his look a mixture of sorrow and commiseration. I was betraying him. I was ashamed to utter in the presence of others the words of intimacy, of home, of friendship.

NESSIM Nessim was forcing me to take a stand against the solidarity of the group.

NA'IM I could not reject our common language without humiliating myself. It was no longer the language of friendship but of the clan.

I listened to myself and the Jewish words stood out in all their strangeness, coldly naked. My sentences were frozen. Before I uttered them, I heard them echo in my ears.

I was reciting a lesson I had learned.

I slipped in a French word.

NESSIM Nessim, pitiless censor, immediately translated into the Jewish dialect.

SA'ID No one smiled.

NASR The new rules of the game had been accepted by common accord with good grace.

NESSIM Generally they looked at us without seeing us.

NASR Now, mysteriously, they recognized our features.

NESSIM They were noting a new color in the panoply. Later, everything would be restored to order, as no one would want to admit the existence of particular cases.

NA'IM In our group we were neither Jew nor Muslim. We were Iraqis, concerned about the future of our country and consequently the future of each one of us.

NESSIM Except that the Muslims felt more Iraqi than the others.



NA'IM It was no use for us to say to them, this is our land and we have been here for twenty-five centuries. We had been there first,

SA'ID They were not convinced. We were different. Was our coloring not lighter than the Bedouins? Did we not know foreign languages?

NESSIM The fact that the best students in Arabic in the final examinations were Jews, that the Alliance school produced the best Arabic grammarians,

SA'ID changed nothing.

NESSIM Our identity was tainted. So be it.

Nessim was assuming this difference. He wanted it admitted.

He did not intend to convince and he had no evidence to produce.

He was presenting a fact. We were Jews and we weren't ashamed of it.

By the end of the evening, we had won the game.

SA'ID For the first time the Muslims were listening to us with respect.

NA'IM We were worthy of our dialect.

NESSIM We were clothed in our own garments. Our mouths were restored to their true form, the one they had worn for generations in the secrecy of the home.

We had not been forcibly assimilated into some vaguely defined group. We had not been cast in a mold with unknown rough surfaces. The masks had fallen.

NA'IM We stood there in our luminous and fragile difference.

NESSIM And it was neither a sign of humiliation nor a symbol of ridicule.

NA'IM In a pure Jewish dialect we made our plans for the future of Iraqi culture.

NESSIM And We did not take shelter behind the veil of an artificial equality.

NASR In the heat of the discussion, Nasr and SA'ID borrowed some of our familiar expressions. They stammered over words they had heard so often but never allowed to cross their lips. They apologized for their awkwardness.

SA'ID As the evening progressed, Jewish words came more frequently to these foreign mouths. It was decidedly uncomfortable to carry on a long conversation in two distinct languages.

NA'IM Perhaps Nessim would stop being so intransigent. Now it was up to us to go along with the others, go halfway towards those who displayed such obvious goodwill. It was particularly important not to claim victory too soon.

New habits are created so quickly, and so quickly forgotten.

NESSIM Nessim's tenacity bore fruit. By the end of the evening

SA'ID Sa'id

NASR and Nasr and all the others too were being introduced to the Jewish dialect, with as much awkwardness

NESSIM as comedy, in the serious matter that it was.



Café Baghdad Vocabulary

Arabic (the literary language or Modern Standard Arabic): Modern Standard Arabic is the language used in writing and in most formal communication. It is used in printed communication such as newspapers and books. It is also the language used for formal speaking in such instances as news reports, classroom lectures, and public speeches.

Arabic Dialect: The spoken form of Arabic, colloquial Arabic. The dialects vary throughout countries and larger distinctions are made between regions. For example, the Arabic spoken in Morocco is often nearly unintelligible for Arabic speakers in Jordan or Syria.

Aristocracy: The privileged or ruling class in society

Bedouin: A member of any of the nomadic tribes in the Middle East.

Dhimmi: A non-Muslim living in a Sharia-ruled Muslim land. One with Dhimmi status pays a special tax in exchange for residency in the land. Dhimmi status was traditionally granted to Jews and Christians, though at times in history was extended to those of other religions and faiths as well.

Elation: Great happiness and exhilaration

Emancipated: Free

Farhood: A violent attack against the Jews of Baghdad on June 1-2, 1941. Approximately 200 Jews were murdered and up to 2000 were injured. There was extensive looting, Jewish homes were destroyed and properties were damaged.

Guy de Maupassant: 19th Century French writer considered to be the father of the modern short story.

Intransigent (adj): Unwilling or refusing to change one's views or to agree about something

Ottoman Empire: The Turkish empire that lasted from 1299-1923. This was one of the largest and longest empires in world history that expanded through much of Asia, North Africa, and Europe.

Panoply: A complete or impressive collection of things; a splendid display

Pogrom: An organized, violent attack on a minority group, characterized by destruction of homes, and businesses as well as significant injuries and deaths. Most often, the term pogrom refers to the 19th and 20th century attacks on Jews.

Shiite: The second largest denomination of Islam, most commonly found in Iran or Iraq

Sunni: The largest denomination of Islam.

Supercilious: Behaving or looking as though one things one is superior to others. Acting haughty or arrogant.

Tacit: Understood or implied without being stated

Talmud: A collection of ancient Rabbinic writings that constitutes the primary source of Jewish law today.

Tenacity: Persistent determination

William Saroyan: 20th century Armenian American dramatist and author



Comprehension Questions

Answer the following questions while listening to Café Baghdad:

1. Who are the four characters in the play?
2. Who had been reading American novelists such as Seroyan and Hemingway?
3. Who advocates for the Arabic literary tradition?
4. Which character had just published a collection of short stories?
5. Who wrote an essay on Balzac and translated a collection of Maupassant stories?
6. What was unusual about that particular evening?
7. What dialect served as their common language?
8. What were the distinguishing characteristics of the
 - a. Christian dialect:
 - b. Jewish dialect:
 - c. Muslim dialect:
9. How were the dialects of the semi literate Jews and rich Jews characterized?
10. What was the initial reaction to Nassim's use of the Jewish dialect that evening?
11. How did the narrator respond?
12. The narrator says that "In our group we were neither Jew nor Muslim." Who does he say they were?
13. According to the narrator, how many centuries had Jews been in Iraq?
14. What made the Jews different?
15. What happened at the end of the evening?



Comprehension Questions: Teacher's Guide

Answer the following questions while listening to Café Baghdad:

16. Who are the four characters in the play? *Nessim, Nasr, Sa'id, narrator (Na'im)*
17. Who had been reading American novelists such as Seroyan and Hemingway? *Nasr*
18. Who advocates for the Arabic literary tradition? *Sa'id*
19. Which character had just published a collection of short stories? *Nasr*
20. Who wrote an essay on Balzac and translated a collection of Maupassant stories? *Nessim*
21. What was unusual about that particular evening? *Nessim spoke in the Jewish dialect*
22. What dialect served as their common language? *The Muslim dialect*
23. What were the distinguishing characteristics of the
 - a. Christian dialect: *They drew out certain words*
 - b. Jewish dialect: *It was sprinkled with Hebrew*
 - c. Muslim dialect: *They borrowed from Classical Arabic*
24. How were the dialects of the semi literate Jews and rich Jews characterized? *Semi literature Jews used some Muslim terms to show they had dealings with them. The rich Jews incorporated French or English into their speech*
25. What was the initial reaction to Nassim's use of the Jewish dialect that evening? *People thought it was a joke*
26. How did the narrator respond? *He was a coward, he was afraid, he was ashamed. He avoided using the Jewish dialect. He used literary Arabic.*
27. The narrator says that "in our group we were neither Jew nor Muslim." Who does he say they were? *Iraqi*
28. According to the narrator, how many centuries had Jews been in Iraq? *25*

29. What made the Jews different? *Their coloring was lighter than the Bedouins. They spoke foreign languages*

30. What happened at the end of the evening? *Everyone uses the Jewish dialect*

Café Baghdad: Discussion Questions

➤ **The Larger Context: Jews in Iraq**

- What are people's reactions to Nessim when he insists on only speaking in the Jewish dialect? Why do you think they react in that way?
- How does the scene highlight ideas of nation building and development of identity?
- Where does it show they're working together to create/define what it means to be Iraqi?
- When the narrator chooses not to respond to Nessim in the Jewish dialect, he says: "I could see in his look a mixture of sorrow and commiseration. I was betraying him. I was ashamed to utter in the presence of others the words of intimacy, of home, of friendship." What does that mean? What does that say about their connection to the language? To each other?
- Read the following lines:

NA'IM (narrator) In our group we were neither Jew nor Muslim. We were Iraqis, concerned about the future of our country and consequently the future of each one of us.

NESSIM Except that the Muslims felt more Iraqi than the others.

NA'IM (narrator) It was no use for us to say to them, this is our land and we have been here for twenty-five centuries. We had been there first,

SA'ID They were not convinced. We were different.

- What does it mean that the Muslims felt more Iraqi than the others?
 - According to who?
 - What makes someone Iraqi?
 - What makes someone American?
 - Can someone be more American than another?
- Given your understanding of the Jewish condition in Iraq in the 1920s, what are the possibilities for the Jews?

➤ **The Larger Context: Jews in the Middle East and North Africa (adapt from questions above)**

- How might the situation for Jews be similar in other countries? How might it be different?

➤ **The Larger Context: Minorities in Iraq and the Middle East (adapt from questions below)**

- How might the situation for other minorities in Iraq be the same as that of the Jews? How might it be different?
- What do you know about minorities in Iraq today? How are they playing a role in the current conflict? What parallels do you see to that of the condition of the Jews in the 1920s?



➤ Exploring Identity

- The main characters use conversations about literature to discuss and debate the political, social and cultural future of Iraq. How can literature be used for this type of debate? What is the connection between literature and politics?
- In Café Baghdad, the narrator says that “we had only to open our mouths to reveal our identity.” What are other ways that identity is revealed? How is your own identity revealed?
- How do we use language to change the way we are perceived? What other things you adjust to impact other people’s perceptions of you
- Each character has multiple identities. For example, the narrator is a Jew, an Iraqi, in intellectual, a friend, a son, etc. In what ways do we see those identities in this scene? What are the different pieces of your identity? When and how are they revealed?
- When did the characters self-identify as Jewish? As Iraqi?
- When were the Jewish characters identified by their peers as Jewish? As Iraqi?
- When the narrator chooses not to respond to Nessim in the Jewish dialect, he says: “I could see in his look a mixture of sorrow and commiseration. I was betraying him. I was ashamed to utter in the presence of others the words of intimacy, of home, of friendship.” What does that mean? What does that say about their connection to the language? To each other?

➤ The Minority Experience

- At what point in the scene do the Jews emerge as different from the others? How?
- Said says that “The Muslims borrowed only from literary language. They felt no need to cast an unfavorable judgment on their dialect.” This implies that using the Jewish dialect (or any other) is unfavorable. Why do you think that is? How do you think that impacts the Jews personally? Socially? Politically?
- Can you think of a comparable situation in America today? In your home town? In your school?
- Once the narrator begins to also speak in the Jewish dialect, Nessim says that “generally, they looked at us without seeing us,” and the narrator follows saying “now, mysteriously, they recognized our features.” What does this mean? How do you think this feels? Have you ever felt like this? What was it like?
- Read the following selection from the script:
“NESSIM: Our identity was tainted. So be it.
Nessim was assuming this difference. He wanted it admitted.
He did not intend to convince and he had no evidence to produce.
He was presenting a fact. We were Jews and we weren't ashamed of it.
By the end of the evening, we had won the game. “
 - Why do you think it was so important to Nessim that the other admitted the difference?
 - How do you think it felt to him to have them admit it?
 - How do you think it felt when the others began using the Jewish dialect?



- What does it say of the Muslims in the group that they gave in to using the Jewish dialect?
- What parallels could you draw to America?



JIMENA: Iraqi Experience

Personal Stories

Of the 135,000 Jews who left Iraq in the last 60 years, each one carries with them a unique collection of memories and stories that have all too often been left untold. With each passing day, another memory of Jewish life in Iraq vanishes and another story is permanently lost. The rich splendor and tragic legacy of Iraqi Jewry must be documented before it is too late.

JIMENA was created to preserve and share the personal stories of Jews who were compelled to flee Arab lands. Since our inception, we have been documenting the detailed histories and often times painful testimonies of Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews. Our archives are continuously growing and we are committed to continue collecting as many stories as we can.

Here you will find a sampling of personal stories from some of JIMENA's members. If you are interested in sharing your story or delving further into the personal and communal histories of Jews who fled Egypt and other Arab lands, we encourage you to contact our office. JIMENA's Oral History library includes transcripts, unedited video footage, books, and copies of documents. We are also happy to connect you to Iraqi Jews for speaking engagements, research, and interviews.

Taken from: <http://jimenaexperience.org/iraq/about-jimena/personal-stories/>



Joe Samuels

In Basra, cold weather in December was unusual, but in 1949 the temperature was in the 40's, and it was bitterly cold at 11 at night. I had put my life in the hands of two Muslim smugglers, and I wasn't alone. There were 15 other teenagers, including my younger brother, Nory. The underground movement to help Jews escape out of Iraq had arranged for a boat to take us to Iran. We boarded, one at a time, at varying intervals, in order to avoid raising suspicion in the neighborhood. We had no luggage, money, food, or water.

The boat, if it could be called that, was about 30 feet long by 10 feet wide. It had no seats, beds, toilets or motors. It moved by punting, a method of propelling the boat forward with long sticks. It was designed to carry light cargo such as manure or hay to the farmers in the delta. In their hay cargo, the two smugglers had devised a false space that measured about 10 feet by 10 feet and about 2.5 feet high. We crouched in complete darkness in this dungeon. I was appointed the person in charge for the journey. The first thing I did was make holes in the hay so that we could breathe. Our escape depended on luck, the tide, and the bribed border police.

So that our crossing would coincide with the tide, at about midnight, the two smugglers pushed the boat out of the tributary river. Our beacon of hope, Iran, was downstream and across the river, two to three hours away. The sound of water splashing broke the stillness of the night and was sweet music in our ears. As we moved down the main river Shat el Arab, "the river of the Arab," our hearts lit with hope for freedom.

However, after about an hour that sweet sound of splashing water stopped. All was quiet except for the sound of the wind. I went out through the hole. The two smugglers looked worried. "We can't move," one of the men said, "the tide is with us, but the wind is against us."

I went back through the hole and told everyone to close their eyes and sleep a bit, while we waited for the wind to subside.

We docked inside a tributary of the river. The hours passed quickly, and I began to worry. My heart was beating faster than the wind, as dawn started to break. We would not be able to move during the day, and were going to miss our rendezvous. What about food, drinks or toilets? What if some villagers were to spot us and tell the Muchabarat, the secret police? After all, we were leaving Iraq illegally and this was a major or a capital crime.

I couldn't share my fears with the boys and girls. One boy was only thirteen. Instead, I put on a stoic face and assured them that everything was going to be alright. We had to wait until darkness to move again. Some started to cry. I felt the same way, but I held back my tears.



One of the boatmen went to get some food. I warned him not to buy food in bulk, since that might create suspicion. It was toilet time, in the early morning. One by one we got out of our hole. One boy, a good friend of mine whose brother had been arrested on Zionism charges just few weeks ago, shook so much he couldn't stand. The boatman returned after an hour with some bread, cheese and dates. Like rats, two or three of us came out of the hole, ate something and went back in, until all the pack was fed.

I was in Arab garb, and wore a long white gown and a Kafia on my head just like the boatmen's. I wandered away from the boat and sat under a tree in the shade. I closed my eyes and yearned to sleep. I couldn't. My life passed before me as if on a movie screen.

I remembered the Farhood of June 2, 1941 in Baghdad, when the mobs murdered over 200 Jews and thousands of Jewish homes were looted. I was 11, I survived. At 14 two Muslims boys ran after me with a knife, I overran them, I survived. In May of 1948, after Iraq and four Arab countries failed war against Israel, many Jewish youths were arrested, tortured, or simply disappeared. Once more, I survived.

Just few days ago, the secret police stopped me at the train station when I had arrived from Baghdad. I was with my brother and two other boys traveling to Basra. One of the policemen asked me my purpose in coming to Basra. I told him that I was visiting my cousin. When I mentioned his name, Agababa, the policeman's eyes lit up and his tone of voice changed. He became sweet and gentle, and said he knew my cousin well. He got his Arrow shirts from him. I knew what he meant. Like what all the secret police did. I survived again. The other two boys were returned to Baghdad. We never heard from them, or saw them again.

Back on the boat, the hours passed slowly. This was the longest day of my life. A river patrol passed by unaware of the human cargo hidden in the stack of hay. I was frightened and frustrated. I began to pray, "God, please let it be night so that we can make our final escape." I went back into the hole. I assured everyone that by the next morning we would be in Iran and that in a few days we would be in Israel.

Joseph Samuels was born in Iraq and now resides in Southern California.

<http://jimenaexperience.org/iraq/about-jimena/personal-stories/joe-samuels/>



Rachel Somekh

Rachelle was born to Kedourie and Rosa Ani on Feb 23rd, 1922 in an upper class neighborhood in the southern port city of Basra. Her father, Kedourie Ani, was a notable tea merchant involved in the lucrative trade circuit between India and Great Britain.

Her first encounters with the food of the Iraqi Jewish people were in her family's kitchen. Her mother, Rosa, was a fine and capable cook, specializing in vegetarian dishes due to her and her husband's adherence to theosophy. But Rachelle's lasting impression was the family's cook who would amaze her with his skills in preparing meals.

At the age of 17 Rachelle introduced to 32 year old Salim Somekh, an official at the port of Basra and the man her parents selected for her husband. Her mother considered him to be a fine selection due of his fine name and solid occupation..

Salim and Rachelle married in 1939 and moved into apartments supplied to port officials. His mother joined them in the new flat and would be the major influence in Rachelle's culinary education. They would have two children in the coming years, a daughter in 1941 named Carmella and a son in 1946 named Sasson.

In 1948, the creation of the state of Israel and subsequent war in Palestine set into motion the disintegration of the community of Iraqi Jews. Nearly overnight, Jews were stripped of many of their basic rights as Iraqis and barred from conducting and participating in the country's commerce.

Salim Somekh was caught in these whirlwinds. As an Assistant Traffic Manager at the port of Basra he enjoyed a prominent and visible position. In June 1948, a month after the war was over, he was arrested along with 5 other Jews and charged with being a communist and a zionist. Despite evidence that he was in a Baghdad hospital the day he was accused of being at a rally supporting the state of Israel, Salim was found guilty and sentenced to five years hard labor in a desert prison.

Rachelle faced a situation where she was with two children, a husband in prison and a social and political situation that was becoming increasingly tense. She and Salim agreed that she should emigrate with the children to Israel where her parents had emigrated a few years before.

Upon arriving in Israel, Rachelle and the children were split up. She went to live with her parents in Jerusalem and the kids were sent separately to boarding schools to be taught Hebrew. Within a year, though, they were reunited in an apartment in Tel Aviv.. Salim joined them in 1953 after being released from prison.

Since then, Rachelle has lived in the center of Tel Aviv. She has survived as both the last generation of Iraqi Jew and the first generation of Israeli, refining and mastering the dishes of a community that existed among the Tigris and Euphrates for over 2,500 years. <http://jimenaexperience.org/iraq/about-jimena/personal-stories/rachel-somekh/>



Edward Ben Eliezer

After the British invasion of Baghdad in May of 1941 the reaction of the city's Arab population was swift and pointed. Violence was unleashed on the Jewish population including Edward Ben Eliezer and his family.

The Farhood (revenge) came to a ten-year-old Edward with a fury. He was with his grandmother, Masooda, seemingly safe behind the barricaded and triple-locked door of their house that was full of valuables. When the mob managed to break through the door, Edward and his grandmother fled to a small attic on the roof. As the mob cleared the home of all its valuables

Edward and Masooda covered under the gunfire coming from the police tower nearby. The indiscriminate shots frightened the violent intruders and kept them from the roof.

After the mob left, Edward and Masooda came down to an empty house. They walked onto the road where Edward saw blood and body parts. They then started running to his father's house where a group of Shiites stood guarding the door. They were loyal because Edward's father, Abraham, worked for the English government and had negotiated for the sale of oil in pounds instead of dinars, making many Shiites very rich.

But the Baghdad that Edward remembers is not only one of terror. While he says that he would not go back because of all the bad that came to him and his family, there were days when Baghdad was "wonderful."

"I had one of the most beautiful childhoods," Edward, now 75, says. "Every summer I would take friends and we would go rowing to an island [on the Tigris] and we would fish and swim and play all day."

There was a curve in the river where sand would accumulate until it created an island. "The water was very clear and clean and there were many fish."

While Baghdad was at times a paradise for Jews like Edward, there were also moments of violence. Once, when he and his older brother, Shalom, were attacked by a group of Muslims, Edward took his belt and started hitting them, but their aggression, which was focused on his brother, did not

subside until Shalom was beaten very badly. Edward believes this beating drove Shalom insane. He is now institutionalized in Israel.

In the last months of 1949 Edward was forced to leave his home. He had been a member of the Haggana, an underground group inspired by the corps of Jews from Palestine involved in the British invasion of Baghdad. It was the Haggana that took Edward and Shalom to Mosul, Iraq. In Mosul they stayed with a man who spoke Kurdish and who took them to the Iranian border.

At the border they were shot at and forced to hide in caves. When they attempted to cross again they were arrested, sent back to Mosul and kept in the synagogue that had been converted into a prison.

“Everything works with money,” Edward says. And with some proper bribes they were taken across the border and into Tehran.

There, Edward and Shalom stayed with their cousin who was sending information to Israel using Morse code. They all lived in a large camp set up for European Jews who had fled from the Holocaust.

“There were children everywhere,” he says, “thousands of children from eight to eleven years old.”

From there, he and Shalom traveled to Israel where they stayed on a Kibbutz near the Tool Karem border in the north. Edward remembers having a good rapport with his Arab neighbors. One early morning, an Arab man in a donkey wagon came screaming for help for his sick child.

Edward sent for a nurse to attend to the child, thus forging a tight relationship with his Arab neighbors. In times of harvest they helped each other.

Because of Edward’s experience with the Haggana, the army selected him to spy on the borders. In the south he was bitten by an insect and contracted malaria. To combat the illness, his doctor suggested he move to a better climate in Greece, Italy or Cyprus.

“I decided to do it much better and visited nine countries,” he says with a chuckle. His travels ended in Monterey, California, after ten days in New York City. “I couldn’t handle the hectic life of the people there.”

In Monterey, he quickly became acquainted with the Jewish community and started giving lectures every Friday. The subject was the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. His audiences included many Palestinians who came to like and respect him very much.

“I thought that they were the future of Palestine.”

After Monterey, Edward moved to Santa Cruz to attend Cabrillo College where he enhanced his previous engineering training. There he met his current wife of forty years, Jacqueline.



“The first day I saw him he looked lost,” she says. “I thought he was cute so I grabbed him and didn’t let him go. I made sure of that. I still haven’t let him go.”

Edward later ran a construction firm and acted as an un-ordained rabbi for Walnut Creek’s Jewish community. Today the couple lives in Oakland, California, and they have two grown daughters.

http://jimenaexperience.org/iraq/about-jimena/personal-stories/ben_eliezer/

Rachel Alwaya

The sun falls on Rachel's gaunt face. The Alzheimer's and time have worn her down. Now her skin is pulled by its own weight over her bones. Her apartment is full of people; her daughter Semha, her son Rami, her niece Amira, her grandchildren Asaf, Li-Hi, Ayelet and Duni and of course her Phillipino attendant Luz.

"Mama!" Rami yells. She looks wearily toward him, her once green eyes have turned blue, the right more closed than the left. Rami speaks in Arabic. Rachel's grandchildren don't understand Arabic – that was a different time.

While the guests sit about the old apartment, the same that Rachel moved into 34 years ago with her husband Yusef, her mind wanders away; maybe to Iraq, to Iran to the transit camps in Israel. She was once a part of a thriving Jewish community in Iraq and was forced out; living both in Israel and Iran. Like 150,000 other Iraqi Jews she had her property confiscated, citizenship revoked and status destroyed.

"She met Yusef when he used to drive her home from school in Baghdad," says a cousin and proprietor of an Iraqi restaurant in Ramat Gan, a heavily Iraqi suburb of Tel Aviv.

Beyond being romanced by Yusef, Rachel was fiercely independent and never thought a thing about being a woman, a Jewish woman in Baghdad. That didn't stop her from going to medical school in Baghdad. If it were not for her aversion to blood she could have been a doctor. If not a doctor why not a lawyer? So Rachel took law courses at the University to obtain a degree in Law. She was one of seven Jewish students allowed to attend Universities in Iraq at the time.

Her headstrong nature ran in her family. Her uncle Sasoon Hiskel was the only Jewish Finance Minister of Iraq. Her father Abdullah was the head of Bedouin Affairs. She also benefited from a close relation with Muslim Iraqis, having gone to Arab schools while most Baghdad Jews were attending French or British schools.

But all that didn't matter. When anti-Semitism exploded into violence she was expelled from the university and forced out of the only home she knew.

In 1951 Rachel and her family left Iraq. She, Yusef and the newborn Semha boarded a plane for Israel, twenty dinars among them. Their home gone, she bore her education with her; a valuable resource. From 1951-1954 Rachel raised Semha in the squalor of an Israeli Transit Camp. In 54 the small family left for Iran hoping for a better life. In Iran it was rumored that there was opportunity and while it was painful to leave the Alwaya clan in Israel they had no choice.

There Rachel put her education to work and quickly became the principal of Etefaq "The Alliance". Etefaq was the hub of Tehran's Jewish community. Across from the university the school had 360 students, a synagogue a pool and the first female principal in Iran – Rachel Alwaya.

“She ran the school with an Iron fist,” says her daughter Semha who also attended the school. “But everybody loved her because she was fair.”

She remained the principal until the family left in 1965. Yusef had left two years before and Rachel longed to bring her now three children back to Israel where her husband and the rest of the Alwaya lived. During her tenure at Etefaq she instituted such progressive programs as having dances with both boys and girls, this in Iran .

In Israel she taught Arabic and held close ties to the Iraqi community. A community that, like all Mizrahi communities in Israel , is increasingly assimilated into the same uniquely Israeli amalgam.

Rachel is a remnant of a different time. And as she slips further away, deeper into her memories, another voice of the collective past of Iraqi Jews is lost.

Joseph Shoua

Joseph Shoua is part of the generation that remembers Iraq well. He was born in 1927 and did not leave till 1951 at the age of 24.

“You had such a good feeling during the holidays,” he says. “In Iraq we [the Jews] were everyday united.”

The Iraq Shoua remembers was both good and terrible. While he loved the unity of Baghdadi Jews he was also wary of his Arab neighbors.

When Shoua was 14 a group of Muslim boys came up to him and asked him if he was a Muslim. He said that he was. The boys then asked him to say a prayer from the Koran. Shoua tried but failed and the boys beat him up.

But it wasn't until years later that the hate that he had seen in those three boys would explode on Baghdad's Jewish community. From a neighbor's window he saw the street filled with bodies, he says. This was in 1943 during the Farhoud.

He came from a large family; he was the fourth of eight children and very close to his mother. As a young man he worked at his brother-in-law's electronics' shop. But when the Jews were expelled he lost his job and his brother-in-law lost his shop. Shoua, like so many others was forced to leave Iraq with only 50 dinars.

Shoua traveled from Iraq to Cyprus with his younger brother and mother; she and Shoua's father were separated. From Cyprus they went to Haifa. They lived in a tent city for 2 years.

“I didn't like Israel so much,” Shoua says. “I couldn't find the work I wanted. I had to work for a bakery. It was twenty hours a day. But I had to provide for my mother. We had to exist so I don't care.”

After they were moved to pahoneem or an aluminum pre-fabricated house in Holon, just outside of Tel Aviv. Shoua worked as a messenger for a school for mentally retarded children. While he liked the children he wasn't so keen on the job.

He doesn't have many fond memories of the camp. Only that there were many Iraqi's many of whom he had known back home. But he says they didn't talk much at night that life was dismal.

“We felt like we were just left in the air,” he says. “That's all we had to talk about.”

But he did find some solace in the Hebrew lesson given at the camp by Shoshana Arbilee who would later become Israel's Health Minister.

In the years after his family got a house, Shoua worked for the Israeli army in the West Bank. He was in charge of procuring materials for the Arab schools.

“It was okay with the Arabs,” he says. “If you can speak to them in Arabic they think you are from the Koran.”

Shoua spent 15 years in Israel before coming to New York where he worked as a stock boy. By 1972 he was heading west to San Francisco. In the city he opened up two gift shops and retired in 1983.

Since coming to America Shoua has been very active.

When Yasser Arafat said that Jews were descended from monkeys, Shoua wrote a letter to the then PLO leader hiding in Tunisia saying that Arafat was descended from a donkey.

He has written to many Arab leaders; what he calls, “bologna,” to maintain his Arabic. He wrote a poem to Saddam Hussein saying how he was the king of kings. Hussein’s communication minister wrote a reply thanking Shoua.

He received a thank you letter from the sister of King Abdullah after writing him a letter. He wrote a poem to Hosni Mubarak saying that Mubarak was the Arab world’s greatest leader. A communication officer sent Shoua a thank you note as well.

He laughs about the letters. Those he did for fun.

Two years ago Shoua became angry at the violence in Iraq. He said it was like, “the end of the world.” So he wrote up some fliers in Arabic saying that no such killing is prescribed in the Koran.

He took the fliers to a Mosque and while the patrons prayed, with their face to the wall, he dropped the stack of fliers and ran away.

He does all these things as his little part to help humanity.

“Everybody can change the world,” he says. But he is concerned.

“Even in Israel people go to work and then go home.” They don’t take time to help others. “People need to be responsible,” he says. This is what he finds lamentable. What he lost in that close knit Jewish community in Baghdad.

While he says he hated some of the customs, especially how a woman was forced into a marriage, he thinks that life in Baghdad was better.

“At least a man was a man and a woman was a woman. Today it’s like the woman is the man and the man is the woman.”

And even with the bad memories Shoua says he would go back, as long as there wasn’t the segregation and violence.

“We used to have activities there. We would go to the beach and eat fish until late in the night. You don’t have that here.”

But more than the fish eaten by the river it was a unity that Shoua has never felt anywhere else. Somehow for him it disappeared.

“We were really Jews with blood and skin,” he says.

The self-labeled bachelor at 78 now lives in San Francisco. He recently finished a book in Arabic where he takes on 40 topics, asking the question what is hope, humanity love or 37 others. He hopes it will be published soon.

<http://jimenaexperience.org/iraq/about-jimena/personal-stories/joseph-shoua/>



Jews of the Middle East and North Africa: A Resource Guide

Middle Eastern Jewish Communities

Egypt

- [The Egyptian Jewish Experience](#), JIMENA. This online resource contains a wide range of information about Jewish life in Egypt. With personal narratives, oral histories, newspaper articles, youtube videos and much more, this website shares the rich history and culture of the Egyptian Jewish experience.
- [The Jews of Egypt](#), Mitchell Bard
- About the Egyptian Jewish Community
 - [The Jews of Egypt, Mitchell Bard](#)
- In the News
 - [Bassatine News](#): The only Jewish newsletter reporting directly from Cairo. Published by the Jewish Community Council of Cairo.
 - [The Curious Case of the Cairo Synagogue](#)
 - [Out of Egypt](#)
 - [Egypt to finance renovation of synagogues, Jewish sites](#)
 - [Egypt Restores Historic Synagogues](#)
- Relevant Organizations
 - [The Historical Society of Jews from Egypt](#)
- Additional Reading
- The Egyptian Jewish Experience: <http://jimenaexperience.org/egypt/>

Lebanon

- [The Jews of Lebanon](#), Mitchell Bard
- [Point of Departure: The 1967 War and the Jews of Lebanon](#). Kirsten E. Schulze, 2009, *Israel Affairs*, 15 (4), p. 335-354
- [Growing Up in Lebanon as a Jew](#), Jewish Image Magazine, 2009
- About the Lebanese Jewish Community
 - [The Jews of Lebanon, Mitchell Bard](#)
 - Schulze, Kirsten E. (2009). Point of departure. *Israel Affairs*, 15 (4). Pp. 335-354
<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=85344948-760e-43f4-b468-a7a4699eefe6%40sessionmgr112&vid=1&hid=105>
 - [Beirut, a Once Thriving Jewish Community](#)
- In the News



- Lebanese Nada Abdelsamad writes book and creates documentary film about Jews in Lebanon
 - [Interview with Abdelsamad, PRI's The World](#)
 - [Documentary Recalls Jewish life in Lebanon](#)
 - [Documentary film examines country's Jewish history, evokes memories](#)
 - [Wadi Abou Jamil: Stories About the Jews of Beirut](#)
- Lebanese Jews Rebuilt Synagogue:
 - [New Synagogue opens religious debate in Lebanon](#)
 - [Who will pray at Lebanon's rebuilt synagogue](#)
- Relevant Organizations:
 - [Lebanese Jewish Community Council](#)
- Additional Reading:
 - [Growing Up Jewish in Lebanon](#)
 - The Jews of Lebanon, Kirsten Schulze: This is the first book to tell the story of the Jews in Lebanon.

Syria

- [The Jews of Syria](#), Mitchell Bard
- [The Jews of Aleppo](#), Sarina Roffe
- [The Aleppo Codex](#), Ben-Tzvi Institute. This website provides access to and information about the Aleppo Codex, the oldest accurate manuscript of the Bible, dating back to 930 CE

Jews of Syria

- About the Syrian Jewish Community
 - [Central Synagogue in Aleppo, Syria](#)
 - [The Jews of Syria, Mitchell Bard](#)
 - [The Jews of Aleppo, Sarina Roffe](#)
- Relevant Organizations
 - [World Center for Aleppo Jewish Traditional Culture \(in Hebrew and English\)](#)
 - [Mrs. Judy's Secret](#)
- Additional Reading
 - [The Aleppo Codex](#): This website provides access to and information about the Aleppo Codex, the oldest accurate manuscript of the Bible, dating back to 930 CE
 - [Aromas of Aleppo](#): Aromas of Aleppo preserves the exquisite cuisine of the Syrian Jews with more than 180 mouthwatering recipes and gorgeous color photographs

Yemen



- [The Yemenite Jewish Experience](#), JIMENA. This online resource created by JIMENA contains personal narratives of Yemini, cultural information background including recipes and audio music clips, as well as detailed history of the Jews of Yemen.

Jews of the Maghreb

[North African Jews during World War II](#), Sheryl Ochayon, Yad VaShem

Algeria

- [Jews of Algeria](#), Mitchell Bard

Libya

- [The Libyan Jewish Experience](#), JIMENA. This online resource created shares the cultures, traditions and stories that make up the rich culture of the Libyan Jewish experience.
- [The Jews of Libya](#), Jewish Renaissance Magazine, 2005

Morocco

- [Visiting Jewish Morocco](#), Rick Gold. Through this virtual tour of Morocco, the reader learns about the history of Moroccan Jews and their role in society.
- [The Jews of Morocco](#), Mitchell Bard

Tunisia

- [Jews of Africa: Tunisia](#), Jay Sand
- [Jews of Tunisia](#), Mitchell Bard

Relevant Organizations:

- [Diarna: Mapping Mizrahi Heritage](#)
- [JIMENA: Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa](#)



Ethno-Religious Minorities in Iraq

- Background Information
 - [The Plight of Iraq's Religious Minorities](#), Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008
 - [Minorities in Iraq](#), World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People, 2008
 - [Still Targeted: Continued Persecution of Iraq's Minorities](#), Minority Rights Group Association, 2010
 - [TheChristiansofIraq.com](#)
 - [Iraq: Chaldean Christians](#), UNHCR, 2000

- In the News
 - [Ethno-Religious Minorities in Iraq](#), Congresswoman Eshoo, Ca
 - [Caucus Highlights Persecution of Christians in Iraq](#), NPR, 2009
 - [Iraq's Endangered Minorities](#), Washington Post, 2005
 - [Iraq's Mandaeans Face Extinction](#), BBC, 2007

- Relevant Organizations
 - [Assyrian International News Agency](#)
 - [Iraqi Minority Council](#)

- Films
 - [Mourning in the Garden of Eden](#)