

Historical Memory and History in the Memoirs of Iraqi Jews*

Mark R. Cohen

Memoirs, History, and Historical Memory

Following their departure en masse from their homeland in the middle years of the twentieth century, Jews from Iraq produced a small library of memoirs, in English, French, Hebrew, and Arabic. These works reveal much about the place of Arab Jews in that Muslim society, their role in public life, their relations with Muslims, their involvement in Arab culture, the crises that led to their departure from a country in which they had lived for centuries, and, finally, their life in the lands of their dispersion. The memoirs are complemented by some documentary films. The written sources have aroused the interest of historians and scholars of literature, though not much attention has been paid to them as artifacts of historical memory.¹ That is the subject of the present essay.

Jews in the Islamic World before the Twentieth Century

Most would agree, despite vociferous demurrer in certain "neo-lachrymose" circles, that, especially compared to the bleaker history of Jews living in Christian lands, Jews lived fairly securely during the early, or classical, Islamic

* In researching and writing this paper I benefited from conversations and correspondence with Professors Sasson Somekh, Orit Bashkin, and Lital Levy and with Mr. Ezra Zilkha. Though a historian of Jews in the Islamic world in the Middle Ages, I chose to write on a literary topic in honor of Tova Rosen, who has contributed so much to our knowledge of another branch of Jewish literature written by Arab Jews.

1 See Jacob Landau's review essay of some ten Arab-Jewish memoirs from the 1970s, most of them from Egypt and a few from Iraq, "Bittersweet Nostalgia: Memoirs of Jewish Emigrants from the Arab Countries," *Middle East Journal* 35 (1981), pp. 229-235. More recently, Lital Levy has written about the Iraqi memoirs in "Self and the City: Literary Representations of Jewish Baghdad," *Prooftexts* 26 (2006), pp. 163-211 and in "A Republic of Letters Without a Republic?" *AJS Perspectives* (Fall 2010), pp. 24-26. In the same issue of *AJS Perspectives*, see Orit Bashkin, "Iraqi Arab-Jewish Identities: First Body Singular," pp. 18-19. Also see Bashkin, "To Educate an Iraqi-Jew: Or What Can We Learn from Hebrew Autobiographies about Arab Nationalism and the Iraqi Education System (1921-1952)," André E. Mazawi and Ronald G. Sultana (eds.), *World Yearbook of Education 2010: Education and the Arab 'World': Political Projects, Struggles, and Geometries of Power*, New York and London 2010, pp. 163-181.

period, up to around the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.² It was not, however, an interfaith utopia, because the Jews (along with Christians) were subject to legal disabilities. But they were also protected as *dhimmit*s, enjoying freedom of religion and movement and benefiting from untrammelled economic opportunity. These were, furthermore, centuries in which Arabic ideas penetrated deeply into the fabric of Judaism, and in which Jews shared substantially in Arabic-Islamic culture. Persecutions were few and far between and almost always directed at non-Muslims as a category, not at Jews per se. They typically occurred when non-Muslims were perceived to have violated the restrictive ordinances of the Pact of 'Umar, ignoring the inferior status assigned to them by Islamic religion and law. Anti-Semitism, understood as an irrational belief in a malevolent, violent, anti-social Jewish alliance with satanic forces seeking to control the world, did not exist.³

Most would also concur that Jews were more severely oppressed in later Islamic centuries, though the level of oppression is often generalized in the literature to the point of exaggeration. It differed in intensity and in form from place to place and circumstance to circumstance and had much to do with general decline in the Muslim world in the post-classical period, a setback that naturally affected the minorities to a greater extent than the Muslim majority. There was, moreover, a period of substantial remission and revival during the heyday of Ottoman imperial expansion in the Middle East and North Africa in the sixteenth century, which coincided with the influx of highly educated and skilled Sephardic Jews expelled from Catholic Spain in 1492. Furthermore, the modern period saw significant amelioration for at least the more well-to-do Jews in many Islamic countries.

Nonetheless, in many places in the later Middle Ages and early modern period, large numbers of Jews lived in abject poverty and squalid conditions, especially where they were cramped into exclusively Jewish neighborhoods (called *mellaḥs* in Morocco and *ḥaras* elsewhere), and they suffered discrimination and sometimes even violence, though the thin upper crust of the well-to-do, again, did not experience this bias in the same way and found means to participate openly in Muslim society or as political or economic agents of Europeans. As is

2 On the trend that I have called the "neo-lachrymose conception of Jewish-Arab history," see my *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*, Princeton 1994; revised edition 2008, Chapter One, and the discussion of that concept in Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1998; Cairo and New York 2005, pp. 14-17.

3 See Mark R. Cohen, "Modern Myths of Muslim Anti-Semitism" [in Hebrew], *Politika* 19 (2009), pp. 121-140; English version in Moshe Maoz (ed.), *Muslim Attitudes to Jews and Israel: The Ambivalences of Rejection, Antagonism, Tolerance and Cooperation*, Brighton 2010, pp. 31-47.

often reiterated, the *dhimma* system, the policy of protection-cum-subordination introduced in the early Islamic centuries, continued in force for all Jews in the Islamic world until pressure from western colonial powers and from European-Jewish organizations seeking to improve Jewish life in the Muslim world led to its abolition in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century and in Morocco at the beginning of the twentieth. In Yemen, which was less subject to these outside pressures, the *dhimma* system remained in effect until the mass exodus of Yemeni Jews to Israel in 1949-1950.

The colonial period was particularly challenging for Jews, as many of them embraced modernization, western education, and extraterritorial protection in order to escape from their disadvantaged position. This, however, drove a wedge between Europeanizing Arab Jews, on the one hand, and Muslims who rejected colonialism and pursued their own nationalist goals, on the other. The extent to which colonialist policies, or, less formally, European interference in Middle Eastern affairs, alongside the dismantling of the traditional *dhimma* system, helped destabilize Jewish-Muslim coexistence in modern times has not been fully appreciated. Jewish-Muslim conflict was compounded by the arrival of Christian anti-Semitism in the hands of European missionaries and other Christians in the nineteenth century, providing fodder for growing anti-Jewish Arab resentment, especially following the rise of political Zionism, the British Balfour Declaration of 1917, and the growth of Jewish settlement in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, leading finally to the establishment of the State of Israel.

Memoirs of the Jews of Iraq

I have chosen to focus on memoirs written by Jews from Iraq or by their descendants because the Iraqi Jews were truly indigenous Arab Jews—most of them natives, tracing their history from the Islamic period back to the Babylonian Exile, two and a half millennia before the twentieth century.⁴ They felt deeply attached to

4 The term and concept "Arab-Jew," or "Arab Jew" without the hyphen, has been the subject of heated controversy, for instance since the work of Ella Shohat in the late 1980s, notably in her book on the stereotyped, negative view of immigrants from Arab lands (Mizrahim) in Israeli film; *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, Austin, TX 1989. An important book written in a similar vein, but studying the phenomenon beginning with the pre-state period and also addressing the question of memory, is Yehouda Shenhav's *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*, Stanford 2006 (Hebrew original 2003). The Arab Jew issue has been discussed in recent scholarly conferences, and in a pair of articles published in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98 (2008), by Lital Levy and Emily Benichou Gottreich, respectively. A heated polemical exchange was played out in the pages of *The Jewish Daily Forward* in 2008: <http://www.forward.com/articles/12561>. See also the incisive essay by Reuven Snir, "Arabs of the Mosaic Faith: Chronicle of a Cultural Extinction Foretold," *Die Welt des Islams* 46 (2006), pp. 43-60, and his book, *Arviyut, yahadut, siyonut*

their homeland, much more so, for instance, than Egyptian Jews, the majority of whom had arrived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from other parts of the Muslim world as well as from Europe and, unlike Iraqi Jews, held European citizenship or were otherwise considered stateless.⁵ The Iraqi perspective on the past more authentically reflects the long-term experience of Jews in the Middle East, and hence their memory of their own history in the light of their twentieth-century experience is especially relevant to our subject.⁶

One of the early and probably the best known among the Iraqi Jewish memoirs is the partially fictional *Farewell, Babylon* by the expatriate Iraqi writer Na'im Kattan, published first in French in 1975.⁷ It followed by three years Emil Murad's Hebrew memoirs, "From Babylonia in the Underground," which appeared in 1972.⁸

Another wave of memoirs, still in motion and little studied, has appeared since the 1980s (I shall discuss the most important ones), though many new memoirs have appeared in Hebrew in recent years. In 1980, the writer Anwār Shaul, who left Baghdad in 1971 and settled in Israel, published his memoirs in Arabic.⁹ Also written in Arabic and published the following year is "All Quiet in the Infirmary" by the Iraqi Jewish army physician, Salmān Darwīsh (1981).¹⁰ In 1986, following an odyssey that led from Iraq to the United States via Iran and Israel, Heskel Haddad, an ophthalmologist, published his autobiographical "Flight from Babylon."¹¹ The memoir-like historical novel by the Iraqi-born author Eli Amir appeared in 1992, with an English translation the following year entitled *The*

[*Arabness, Jewishness, Zionism: A Clash of Identities in the Literature of Iraqi Jews*], Jerusalem 2005; see also Hanan Hever and Yehoudah Shenhav, "Arab Jews: The Metamorphosis of a Term" [in Hebrew], *Pe'amim* 125-127 (2010-2011), pp. 57-74, part of a special issue devoted to the topic "Arab Jews? A Polemic about Identity."

- 5 See Jacob M. Landau, *Jews in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, New York and London 1969, pp. 3-9; Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914-1952*, Seattle 1989, pp. 8-10.
- 6 Apart from the essays by Lital Levy and Orit Bashkin mentioned in note 1, the only other article I know that discusses the memoirs of Iraqi Jews is by Shmuel Moreh, who wrote about some of them in an essay devoted to recollections of the Farhūd: "The Pogrom of June 1941 in the Literature of Iraqi Jews in Israel," Shmuel Moreh and Zvi Yehuda (eds.), *Al-Farhūd: The 1941 Pogrom in Iraq*, Jerusalem 2010 (a revised, English edition of the Hebrew volume of 1992, including some updates in Moreh's essay).
- 7 Na'im Kattan, *Adieu, Babylone*, Montreal 1975; *Farewell, Babylon*, From French: Sheila Fischman, New York 1980.
- 8 Emil Murad, *Mi-bavel ba-mahteret* [From Babylonia in the Underground], Tel Aviv 1972.
- 9 Anwār Sha'ul, *Qiṣṣat ḥayātī fī wādī al-raḥīdayn* [The Story of My Life in Mesopotamia], Jerusalem 1980.
- 10 Salmān Darwīsh, *Kull shay' hādī' fī'l-'iyāda* [All Quiet in the Infirmary], Jerusalem 1981.
- 11 Heskel Haddad, *Flight from Babylon: Iraq, Iran, Israel, America*, New York 1986. See my reference to another work of his in Cohen, note 2 above, p. 14.

Dove Flyer.¹² In 1994, Esther Mercado self-published in typescript font *Iraq: My Testimony* based on a diary she kept between 1948 and 1951, between the ages 13 and 16. It contains a brief account of earlier events.¹³ The Iraqi-born immigrant to Israel, Mordechai Ben-Porat, penned his Hebrew memoirs in 1996 (published in English as *To Baghdad and Back* in 1998), telling the story of his clandestine activities to rescue Iraqi Jewry in 1950 and 1951.¹⁴ Ezra Zilkha, an Iraqi-born Jew living in New York and head of a wealthy international Jewish business family from Baghdad, published his memoirs in 1999, featuring as the central character the patriarch of the family, his father Khedouri Zilkha, the founder of the first private bank in the Middle East.¹⁵

Another immigrant to Israel, Sasson Somekh, now Emeritus Professor of Arabic at Tel Aviv University and a leading scholar of modern Arabic literature, serialized memoirs of his life as a young man in Baghdad in a Hebrew daily and later in book form (2004), with a subsequent translation into English (2007) entitled *Baghdad Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew*.¹⁶ In 2004, Somekh's contemporary from Baghdad, the journalist and historian of his mother country, Nissim Rejwan, published the story of his early life, *The Last Jews in Baghdad*.¹⁷ A collection of short autobiographical testimonies of Jews from Iraq, *Iraq's Last Jews*, compiled by a journalist, a professor of computer science, and a businessman, all of Iraqi origin, added another dimension to the treasure of memoirs of Iraqi Jews (2007).¹⁸

In the manner of Ezra Zilkha's memoirs, the writer Ariel Sabar places his father, the prominent Kurdish-Jewish Aramaic scholar. Yona Sabar, in the central role in a memoir about him, entitled *My Father's Paradise*, a title that echoes the feelings of the majority of memoirists (2008).¹⁹ In the same spirit, *The Last Days*

12 Eli Amir, *Mafriah ha-yonim*, Tel Aviv 1992; English version: *The Dove Flyer*, From Hebrew: Hillel Halkin, London 1993.

13 Esther Mercado, *Iraq: My Testimony*, Ramat Gan 1984.

14 Mordechai Ben-Porat, *Le-Bagdad va-hazara: sippuro shel Mivsha' Ezra u-Nehemya*, Or Yehudah 1996; English version: *To Baghdad and Back: The Miraculous 2,000 Year Homecoming of the Iraqi Jews*, From Hebrew: Marcia Grant and Kathy Akeriv, Jerusalem and New York 1998.

15 Ezra K. Zilkha, *From Baghdad to Boardrooms: My Family's Odyssey*, n.p. 1999.

16 Sasson Somekh, *Baghdad Etmol*, Tel-Aviv 2004; English version: *Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew*, Jerusalem 2007. Somekh has written a sequel covering his life in Israel after immigrating: *Yamim hazuyim*, Tel-Aviv 2008; English version: *Life after Baghdad: Memoirs of an Arab-Jew in Israel, 1950-2000*, From Hebrew: Tamar L. Cohen, Brighton 2012.

17 Nissim Rejwan, *The Last Jews in Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland*, Austin 2004. Rejwan is also the author of *The Jews of Iraq: 3000 Years of History and Culture*, London 1985.

18 Tamar Morad, Dennis Shasha, and Robert Shasha (eds.), *Iraq's Last Jews: Stories of Daily Life, Upheaval, and Escape from Modern Babylon*, New York 2007.

19 Ariel Sabar, *My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for his Family's Past*, Chapel Hill 2008.

in *Babylon* (2008), by London-based journalist Marina Benjamin, chronicles the history of her Baghdadi family, focusing on the life of her grandmother—a book part nostalgic eulogy for a society and culture that came to an abrupt end in the early 1950s, part history of the turbulent period in which that momentous event was set.²⁰ In the same year (2008) that Sabar and Benjamin published their memoirs of their parents' generation, *Memories of Eden*, the posthumous memoirs of Violette Shamash, who died in 2006 at the age of 94, also appeared. The book was compiled by her daughter and son-in-law from her unpublished text written over a period of twenty years.²¹ The memoir of the Iraqi-born writer Shimon Ballas, *In First Person*, appeared in Hebrew in 2009.²²

Almost without exception, the memoirists mentioned so far belonged to the wealthy or middle class.²³ When the poor neighborhood of Tatran in Baghdad is mentioned by Sasson Somekh, for instance, it is portrayed as something utterly "other."²⁴ In Naïm Kattan's words, "[i]nvisible barriers separated the poor neighbourhoods in the Jewish community from the others."²⁵ One of the few memoirists from the poorer segment of Baghdad society is Badri Fattal (2005), who grew up in Tatran and emigrated to Israel with the mass exodus of Iraqi Jewry in 1950–1951.²⁶ Despite his family's economic hardship, his connection to Baghdad is no less nostalgic than that of the wealthier Jews, who talk about a "golden age" or "paradise" before the troubles began in the 1940s. In Israel, Fattal's studies led to a successful career as a professor of environmental medicine at the Hebrew University. His more famous brother, Salim Fattal, well known in his guise as broadcaster in the Israel Radio Arabic service, also wrote his memoirs, explicitly, he says, to give voice to the non-elite, poorer (and larger) segment of Baghdad society (2003). Compared to his brother, Salim is more bitter about his family's poverty and more resentful of the Jewish upper classes.²⁷

To the memoirs mentioned here can be added several documentary films. The

20 Marina Benjamim, *The Last Days in Babylon: The Exile of Iraq's Jews, the Story of My Family*, New York 2008.

21 Violette Shamash, *Memories of Eden: A Journey through Jewish Baghdad*, Mira and Tony Rocca (eds.), Surrey 2008.

22 Shimon Ballas, *Be-guf rishon* [In First Person], Tel Aviv 2009.

23 Nissim Rejwan came from a poor family, though as a young adult he belonged to the educated Arab-Jewish intelligentsia and was deeply embedded in general Iraqi literary circles. Ballas came from a family of modest economic circumstances.

24 Somekh, note 16 above, pp. 96–97.

25 Kattan, note 7 above, p. 40.

26 Badri Fattal, *Halomot be-Ṭatran, Baghdad* [Dreams in Tatran, Baghdad], Jerusalem 2005.

27 Salim Fattal, *Be-simṭa'ot Baghdad* [In the Alleys of Baghdad], Jerusalem 2003. An English excerpt from the book is included in Morad et al., (eds.), note 18 above, pp. 41–49.

Israeli filmmaker Duki Dror's documentary, *My Fantasia* (2001), recounts Dror's quest for his Iraqi roots through interviews with members of his family who left the country for Israel. It is peppered with reminiscences by uncles and parents, mixing nostalgia with bitterness (the filmmaker's father was imprisoned for five years for attempting to leave Iraq illegally for Israel), including unpleasant memories of their reception in Israel.

The prize-winning documentary film *Forget Baghdad* (2002), by the Zurich-based Iraqi-Muslim filmmaker Samir, consists of interviews—in Arabic—with three well known Iraqi Jewish writers in Israel (Sami Michael, Shimon Ballas, and Samir Naqqash) and with an Iraqi-Israeli building contractor; the filmmaker also interviews Israeli/Iraqi Professor of Cultural Studies, Ella Shohat, at New York University. Samir wanted to recover his father's experiences as a Shiite member of the Communist party in Iraq, in which Jews figured prominently. The memories of Baghdad he elicits are largely positive. One of the interviewees contrasts his fond memories of Baghdad with the very bitter experience he encountered in Israel. A more recent documentary (2005), *The Last Jews of Baghdad*, by Carole Basri, an American attorney and scion of a prominent Baghdad family, features interviews with Iraqi Jewish émigrés, whose testimonials portray a bleaker memory.²⁸ Several YouTube clips present the same gloomy portrayal of Jewish life in Iraq, particularly in connection with the Farhūd of June 1941.²⁹

From Farhūd to Exodus

For several decades following the replacement of Ottoman by British imperial rule in 1917, the Jews of Iraq—at least the middle class—enjoyed substantial comfort and prosperity, experiencing generally good relations with Muslim friends and business associates. Then the walls of the Jewish-Muslim convivencia suddenly came crashing down. At the beginning of the summer of 1941 (June

28 Carole Basri also produced a documentary about her grandfather, the wealthy Iraqi businessman Frank Iny, and another documentary about her own journey in search of Iraqi émigrés living in India, Myanmar (Burma), and Hong Kong. Large numbers of Iraqi Jews left Iraq in the first half of the twentieth century seeking business opportunities in these places. See also Carole Basri, "The Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries: An Examination of Legal Rights: A Case Study of the Human Rights Violations of Iraqi Jews," *Fordham International Law Journal* 25 (2002-2003), pp. 656-720.

29 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWgTxigcc0A>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtGYucpUs9E&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6vbcquY89k&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ygdU7dpZS4&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvdwZ6R8QxY>

The memory of the Farhūd is kept alive by the annual commemoration at the Babylonian Jewish Heritage Center in Or Yehuda, Israel; see the Center's newsletter *Nehardea*, http://www.babylonjewry.org.il/new/pdfs/NehardeaH_31_2011.pdf (pp. 27-28).

1 and 2), the Jews of Baghdad were traumatized by a "pogrom" in which some 180 people (estimates of the number vary) perished, many hundreds more were injured, some brutally, and much Jewish property was plundered or destroyed. This outpouring of wrath and violence occurred during a power vacuum following the British overthrow of the nationalist, pro-Nazi coup against the monarchy led by Rashīd 'Ālī al-Kīlānī (Gaylānī) and his henchmen, among them the pro-Nazi Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Ḥājj Amīn al-Ḥusseīnī, who was living in exile in Iraq at the time. For the two months that it was in power, the rebel regime spewed anti-Semitic propaganda that terrified the Jewish community.

At the end of May, British forces defeated the army of the rebellion and prepared to reinstate the legitimate regime headed by the child-king and his regent. Encamped outside the city, however, the British force failed to step in to nip the violence in the bud, and the results, perpetrated by routed soldiers of the rebel regime, an amorphous mob of local Iraqis, and Bedouins from outside the city—some of the perpetrators acting out of hatred for the Jews, others out of lust for plunder—were disastrous. The exact details of the British failure to protect the Jews, in particular the uninspiring role played by the British Ambassador to Iraq, Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, have been much discussed by historians, some seeing British policy in Iraq as bearing considerable responsibility for the damage that was done.³⁰

The Iraqi Jewish memoirs portray the Farhūd as the result of political factors, not of any inherent, systemic, primeval Muslim anti-Semitism.³¹ Rather it was Nazi meddling and European anti-Semitic propaganda, beginning with broadcasts from Germany in Arabic and Persian in the 1930s, that inspired the Jew-hatred which, in part, fuelled the pogrom. Goaded on by Nazi propaganda, nationalist opposition to British influence in Iraq before and after the Mandate lapsed in 1932 identified the Jews as "allies" of the British and strove to undermine their

30 See Elie Kedourie's account of the episode in "The Break between Muslims and Jews in Iraq," Mark R. Cohen and A. L. Udovitch (eds.), *Jews among Arabs: Contacts and Boundaries*, Princeton 1989, pp. 21-63; also Kedourie, "The Sack of Basra and the Farhud in Baghdad," in his *Arabic Political Memoirs and Other Studies*, London 1974, pp. 283-314. The Farhūd has received extensive exposure, as a search of the word "Farhud" on the Internet will reveal. See also the collection of articles, *Al-Farhūd*, note 6 above, and issue no. 8 (1981) of the journal *Pe'amim*, devoted in part to the Farhūd on its fortieth anniversary.

31 This applies to Iraqi memoirists of the earlier period, too, such as Emil Murad, in his Hebrew memoirs, note 8 above, pp. 19-21. He was around ten years old at the time of the pogrom. Esther Mercado, who was six at the time, writes in her memoir, note 13 above, p. 7: "Hatred for Jews was not acutely felt then, and the Zionist underground was not born yet."

comfortable position in society.³² One manifestation of this was a quota system for admission to medical schools. Other restrictions were also introduced.

During the decade following the Farhūd, political developments in Palestine eroded the security of the Jews of Iraq and led to the exodus of nearly the entire Jewish community of Iraq in 1950 and 1951. The turning point came with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the ignominious Arab defeat in the Israeli War of Independence that followed, which the Arabs call the *nakba* ("catastrophe"). The unexpected setback stirred up Muslim rage against the Jews of Iraq and raised suspicions that all of them were secret Zionists, aiding and abetting Israel. One terrible event was the public hanging in September 1948 of the wealthy Jew, Shafiq 'Adas, in Basra, convicted on charges of aiding Israel. This was followed by increasing government oppression and by tension within the community over Zionism and the effects of the establishment of the State of Israel.³³ Then, in March 1950, a law was passed by the Iraqi parliament offering the Jews the opportunity to enroll in a government program for surrendering their citizenship in return for permission to leave forever the land in which they had such deep roots. Though usually portrayed as a forced exile, or expulsion, and so felt by many who went through it, there is considerable evidence that the law of 1950 itself was motivated by less evil motivations. Many Jews, moreover, greeted the news with considerable ambivalence, weighing the opportunity to escape from danger against the thought of abandoning a land to which they had close, native ties and where their wealth was concentrated.³⁴

32 Palestinian and Syrian pan-Arabist teachers and other professionals living in Iraq also contributed to anti-Jewish feeling there (Shmuel Moreh, "The Role of the Palestinian Incitement and the Attitude of Arab Intellectuals to the *Farhūd*," Moreh and Yehuda [eds.], note 6 above, pp. 119-150; Nissim Kazzaz, *Jews in Twentieth-Century Iraq* [in Hebrew], Jerusalem 1951, pp. 198-204), but the memoirists do not mention this factor, possibly because most Jews attended Jewish schools and were not directly exposed to this propaganda.

33 Such debates figure prominently as a theme in Eli Amir's novel, note 12 above.

34 The events of 1950-1951 came at a time when Jews had been stealing out of the country illegally with the help of smugglers, mainly to Iran. The denaturalization law of March 1950 was meant to gain control over Jewish emigration by legally opening up the gates to undesirables. The introduction to the law is quite explicit on this point (see Moshe Gat, *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq 1948-1951*, London 1997, p. 70, quoting the passage; also Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times*, Philadelphia 1991, pp. 525-526). The law was not passed in order to forcibly "expel" them, or out of anti-Semitic hatred. The editors of the collection *The Last Jews of Iraq*, note 18 above, p. 79, attribute it to "anger at these smugglers, the work of the [Zionist] Young Halutz [movement], and that of secret Mossad emissaries like Shlomo Hillel from Palestine and [Mordechai] Ben-Porat." According to Ben-Porat's personal eyewitness account, the law of 1950 was greeted with elation, both in Baghdad and in Israel, with joyous celebration on the Purim holiday that fell a week after the law's promulgation (Ben-Porat, note 14 above, pp. 82-85; he calls his chapter on these events "The Gates are Opened"). Echoes of the ambivalence many Jews felt at the time the law was announced

In a second law, one year later, property of Jews who had departed or were about to depart was frozen. Jews were allowed to leave carrying only small amounts of money. For this reason some 6,000 of the wealthier Jews stayed behind. By the end of 1951, over 120,000 Jews had enrolled in the denaturalization program and by the beginning of 1952 all had left for Israel. The Israeli Mossad Le-Aliyah Bet (Organization for Illegal Immigration), through its agents operating in Iraq, facilitated their departure, providing planes, with Iraqi cooperation, to ferry the Jews to Israel. The Iraqi policy of denaturalization; the poisoned atmosphere

can be heard in Amir's *The Dove Flyer*, note 12 above, pp. 320-321. The memoirist Badri Fattal strikes a more neutral tone. Chronically ill with pneumonia at the time and craving better medical attention abroad, he writes (with a sigh of relief): "In April [sic] 1950, a law was passed in Iraq *permitting* the Jews to leave on condition that they agree to surrender their Iraqi citizenship" (note 16 above, p. 104; emphasis is mine, M. C.). He obtained better medical attention in Israel and recovered from his illness.

The choice of words used to describe what happened ("expulsion," "emigration," "exodus," "exile," "ethnic cleansing") depends on the writer's point of view. The term "ethnic cleansing" seems the least appropriate. The Iraqi government had no plans to use drastic measures to purge the country of its Jews and in fact did not expect them all to leave. They simply wanted to rid Iraq of undesirables, the very people who had been slipping out of the country illegally. See Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, *Zionism in an Arab Country: Jews in Iraq in the 1940s*, New York 2004, pp. 240-241; cf. Gat, this note above, pp. 70-73. Nūrī al-Sa'īd, the Iraqi Prime Minister, figured, moreover, that Iraq could hasten the collapse of Israel's economy by flooding the country with thousands of immigrants—though he, too, never expected so many would leave as ultimately did (Gat, this note above, p. 119).

In the beginning, in fact, registration was slow. Many Jews suspected it was just a ploy to identify and arrest Zionists anxious to leave the country (Amir, note 12 above, p. 338). In a large number of cases, members of a family decided to forfeit their citizenship and leave only because one member of the family had decided to do so. Such was the case with the twenty-year-old Shimon Ballas, as he describes in his memoir, note 22 above, p. 7. The Israeli government did not believe so many would depart and was taken aback by the ultimate totals. Israel had no infrastructure in place to absorb large numbers in such a short time-span, which forced it for a while to stall the departures from Iraq.

One of the most controversial issues associated with the denaturalization process was the explosion of several bombs in places where Jews gathered, in April and June 1950, in January 1951 (inside a crowded synagogue, where three Jews were killed by the explosion), and in May and June 1951, against Jewish businesses. An explosive device was also thrown at the premises of the American USIS in March of that year. Responsibility for these explosions and whether they were meant to hasten the Jews' departure from the country are issues that to this day are shrouded in uncertainty, the candidates being Israeli agents, the Iraqis, or Jewish activists from the community. See Hayyim J. Cohen, *Zionist Activity in Iraq* [in Hebrew], Jerusalem 1969, pp. 210-212; Meir-Glitzenstein, this note above, pp. 249, 256-257; Gat, this note above, pp. 160-191. Mordechai Ben-Porat's vociferous denial of Israeli complicity, including a transcript of the Israeli Commission of Inquiry, are found in his abovementioned memoir. A skeptical point of view, pointing the finger at the Israelis, is argued by Abbas Shibliak, *Iraqi Jews: A History of Mass Exodus*, London 1986 and 2005, pp. 151-165. His theory is generally discounted by Israelis and others because he himself is a Palestinian refugee from the Israeli-Arab war of 1948-1949. But many Jews believe or believed that Israel agents had indeed been responsible. See, for instance, the memoir of Esther Mercado, note 13 above, p. 62.

in the country; the anxiety of the wealthy over economic losses; the economic hardship of many in the poorer class; the fear of violence; and finally, the availability of a safe destination in Israel — all of these combined to provide the impetus for this mass exodus.³⁵

Jewish Historical Memory

Before discussing the historical memory reflected in the Iraqi memoir literature it is instructive to recall the better-known historical memory of Jews from Europe, the Ashkenazim. Beginning in the Middle Ages, the Jews of Europe produced a huge literature of suffering and martyrdom, accompanied by condemnation of Christianity and Christians, the perpetrators. This collective historical memory of Christian hatred and relentless persecution was reinforced every time a Jew or a Jewish community stood accused of some misdeed, such as the infamous blood libel, and was punished, usually severely, often without judicial process. The Jewish collective historical memory was strengthened every time Jews were forced to convert to Christianity, every time the right of freedom of religion was undermined (the burning of the Talmud in the thirteenth century in France being exemplary). Jews recalled prior persecutions every time a Jewish community was expelled from its homeland of centuries.

This collective memory of Christian persecution did not disappear in modern times. It was enshrined in the writings of the first modern Jewish historians of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* school in the nineteenth century in their retelling of the story of Jewish life in Christian lands — which they contrasted with the "tolerance" they ascribed to Muslim treatment of the Jews in the Middle Ages, Muslim Spain being the model. The memory of medieval persecution jibed with their own experience of discrimination at the hands of European Christians, who denied them a place in the universities and in other academic venues, despite the civil equality promised by the Emancipation. Discrimination did not vanish for those Jews who adopted the new Reform Judaism, which was supposed to "modernize" the religion and make Jews more acceptable in Christian eyes. The new political and racial anti-Semitism, surfacing in the second half of the nineteenth century, only fuelled the despair, which, in turn, reinforced the older collective memory of persecution, encouraging many to

35 The remaining Jews, most of them from the wealthier class, were well protected by the incumbent government, and for many years lived comfortably and with economic security. This lasted until the Six Day War of June 1967, after which things deteriorated drastically for the Jews, some of whom were hung for allegedly spying on behalf of Israel. By the time Saddam Hussein took power in 1979 there were very few Jews left in the country. He might very well have violently ethnically cleansed the country of them, as he murdered thousands of Kurds, had their numbers not by that time been so insignificant.

adopt the new political Zionism as a solution to what was known by then as "the Jewish Question."

The European Jewish collective memory of persecution was further reinforced during the Nazi era, when anti-Semitism became an instrument of the evil and destructive policy of the Nazi Party and, after Hitler came to power in 1933, of the German government. Finally, the Holocaust itself put the lie to any hope that Christian violence against the Jews, deeply rooted in the past and so remembered, could be eradicated. Uncountable tomes of books, memoirs, oral histories, and films about the Holocaust, along with museums and memorial monuments around the world, as well as a proliferation of university and adult education courses on the Holocaust, have perpetuated the Ashkenazi collective memory of suffering and turned the Holocaust into perhaps the most pervasive reality of Jewish life today, both in the diaspora and in Israel. Nothing symbolizes the collective historical memory of European Jewry more poignantly than the motto, born of the Holocaust, "never forget."

Writing even before the Holocaust, historian Salo Baron famously lamented the overpowering influence of this "lachrymose" conception of the premodern European past. In much of his work Baron sought to provide a corrective to this distortion with an "anti-lachrymose" interpretation of the past, but the historical memory he attempted to combat did not die, in part because it rested on a large kernel of historical truth. Recent attempts to "correct" the gloomy Ashkenazi historical memory may be said to be a post-Holocaust attempt to correct an amnesia regarding a more integrated relationship with Christian society and more friendly relations between Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages. Elsewhere I have called this new approach a "neo-anti-lachrymose" conception of Jewish history.³⁶

Historical Memory of the Jews of Arab Lands

What can we say about the historical memory of Arab Jews who left their homelands under duress in the middle years of the twentieth century, in some cases following acts of violence? Did this jibe with a long-term historical memory of suffering that related to this experience? Was their recall of the past, like that of Ashkenazim, based on some factual foundation of historical persecution? Or was their historical memory different?

One point of view is that the anti-Jewish violence in Muslim countries in the mid-twentieth century was only the latest link in a long chain of persecution—some

36 See Cohen, note 2 above, p. 271.

would say, of primordial Islamic anti-Semitism—collectively and correctly remembered by the Jews themselves.³⁷ This argument is consistent with Zionist historiography, a narrative born of the European experience and predicated on a teleological history of suffering and anti-Semitism leading to the Holocaust and, finally, to the redemptive establishment of the State of Israel.

An example of grim portrayal of the past by Jews from Arab countries is the following passage, which I have quoted elsewhere, from the mission statement of the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC), published in 1975, the year the organization was established:

Arab oppression of Jews is not, therefore, a post-1948 phenomenon. It is rooted in Islam and has been an inescapable characteristic of the relations between Arabs and Jews since Muhammad's time. Twentieth-century Arab persecution of Jews is only a continuation and intensification of this centuries-long tradition, in which the socially and religiously inferior Jew bore the brunt of the Muslim masses' contempt and the Muslim governments' arbitrary policies and financial troubles.³⁸

Writing in 1974, Tunisian-born Arab-Jewish intellectual Albert Memmi bemoaned the exclusive claim by Ashkenazi Jews to a historical memory of persecution

37 Regarding the collective memory of Jews from Arab lands, see Norman Stillman, "Myth, Counter-Myth, and Distortion," *Tikkun* (May/June 1991), pp. 60-64, a response to the present writer's "The Neo-Lachrymose Conception of Jewish-Arab History" in the same issue, pp. 55-60. Others, holding a more extreme, "neo-lachrymose" view are the writer Bat Ye'or and blog-masters Robert Spencer, Pamela Geller, and Andrew Bostom. The latter's latest book, *The Legacy of Islamic Anti-Semitism: From Sacred Texts to Solemn History*, Amherst, NY 2008, presents itself as a kind of encyclopedia of translated Arabic sources and scholarly articles allegedly tracing Arab-Muslim Jew-hatred back to earliest times. The recent book by Martin Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House: A History of Jews in Muslim Lands*, New Haven 2010, the latest in the "neo-lachrymose" library, records an unending litany of Jewish suffering with very little contextualization and only an occasional nod to "good Muslims" who befriended or helped Jews threatened with persecution.

38 Maurice Romani, et al. (eds.), *The Case of the Jews from Arab Countries: A Neglected Issue*, Vol. 1, Jerusalem 1975, p. 48. Founded in 1975 by Mordechai Ben-Porat, whose memoirs are discussed in this article, WOJAC supported the publication, among other things, of Martin Gilbert's *The Jews of Arab Lands: Their History in Maps*, London 1976, which graphically illustrates the historical persecution of the Jews in the Islamic world, pinpointing instances of persecution over the ages. That publication appeared in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic editions. The organization has been subjected to critical study by Shenhav, note 4 above, pp. 142-183. A similar organization in San Francisco with a similar goal is JIMENA—Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, one of whose stated purposes is "to address the existing gap in the historical narrative of the Middle East and North Africa by sharing the Mizrahi and Sephardi story of oppression, plight and displacement" (<http://www.jimena.org>).

and pled for recognition of similar suffering by Jews of Arab lands. He wrote, famously: "[i]f we leave out the crematoria and the murders committed in Russia, from Kichinev to Stalin, *the sum total of the Jewish victims of the Christian world is probably no greater than the total number of victims of the successive pogroms, both big and small, perpetrated in the Moslem countries.*"³⁹

Some scholars point to what they call the "Holocaust experience" of Jews from Arab lands. This trend is especially evident with regard to some Jews from Iraq, who describe the Farhūd as a Middle Eastern chapter of the Nazi extermination of Jews in Europe.⁴⁰ Yad Vashem, the national Holocaust museum in Israel, archives documents relevant to episodes of persecution in Islamic lands, including the Farhūd.⁴¹ These are accompanied by the grisly story of the removal of Jews in North Africa to regional forced labor camps during the Vichy-French, Italo-fascist, and German-Nazi occupations, and tragic accounts of deportations to concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Europe during the Second World War.⁴²

The theme of protracted persecution of Jews in Islamic lands, an attempt to

39 Albert Memmi, *Jews and Arabs*, From French: Eleanor Levieux, Chicago, 1975, p. 27 (emphasis in the original). The French *Juifs et arabes* appeared in 1974.

40 In the Introduction to *Al-Farhūd*, Shmuel Moreh writes: "We think that it is time now to reconsider the possibility that both the U.S. authorities and German government will include the survivors of the *Farhūd* in their list of Nazi victims and an integral part of the Holocaust" (Moreh and Yehuda [eds.], note 6 above, p. 8). See also Moreh's essays in the same volume, "The Role of Palestinian Incitement," pp. 124-125 (esp. p. 136: "[T]he *Farhūd*, in which at least 133 [sic] Jews were killed and 2500 injured, should be seen as an inseparable part of the Holocaust of the Jews in Europe"), and "The Pogrom of June 1941 in the Literature of Iraqi Jews in Israel," p. 221. Representative of this trend linking the Farhūd with the Holocaust is Edwin Black's 'neo-lachrymose' book, *The Farhud: The Roots of the Arab-Nazi Alliance in the Holocaust*, Washington, DC 2010. An organization called the Association to Commemorate the Sho'a-Holocaust of Arabian Jews is devoted to this theme: <http://www.shoaaj.com/158022/English>.

41 An example in the appendix of documents in the book *Al-Farhūd*, note 6 above, pp. 265-267, is a letter from the Nazi emissary in Baghdad, Dr. Fritz Grobba.

42 Robert Satloff, *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands*, New York 2006. Satloff's book was made into a public television documentary and aired in 2010 for the first time. His research does not overlook instances of local Arab collaboration in the German, Vichy, and Italo-fascist persecution of Jews in slave labor detention camps, though he also points out that for many Arabs their complicity stemmed from nationalist glee at the overthrow of the colonialists, with whom many Jews had traditionally sympathized. Two of his striking conclusions are that most Arabs are not willing to admit that they or their families helped Jews, lest they seem to be too sympathetic to Jews today or to be swimming against the tide of Arab Holocaust denial, with all its political implications; and that the Israeli national Holocaust establishment at Yad Vashem is not interested in documenting "righteous gentiles" among the Arabs, for its own obvious political reasons. Cases of Muslims protecting Jews during the Farhūd in Baghdad in June 1941 abound in the memoir literature.

assimilate an Ashkenazi-like historical memory, is a theme sounded by organizations dedicated to preserving the history of Middle Eastern Jewry. An example is an Israeli documentary film about the pogrom in Baghdad in 1941, produced by the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center and televised in 2008, which was meant to bring this tragic episode to the attention of the general Israeli public.⁴³ In interviews with eyewitnesses and period footage of Baghdad (though not of the actual atrocities), it suggests comparison with anti-Semitic pogroms in Europe. The historical narrative of the film is basically accurate. But if the film was meant to suggest centuries of suffering at the hands of Muslims, no one who was interviewed implied that the pogrom was a link in a long chain of Islamic persecution. In a typical sentiment, one interviewee states: "the Farhūd put an end to the illusion of the Jews of Iraq that we could live [comfortably] in the surrounding society among Iraqis."⁴⁴ Many, moreover, saw it as no more than a passing event. "After the Farhūd, some still believed that we could live an integrated existence. Then came the acts of oppression at the end of the 1940s, the arrests and the hangings."

This last comment was apparently meant by the filmmakers to evoke comparison with the well known sentiments of Weimar Jewry, for whom Nazi persecution came as a surprise and a shock. In fact, this Iraqi informant's description of the mindset of Jews who lived through the Farhūd is consistent with what other memoirists write about the total shock it represented. However, neither he nor, as we shall see, the literary memoirists connect this with a history of Islamic persecution from time immemorial. For them it is the beginning of persecution, not its historical climax.

A conversation in Eli Amir's *Dove Flyer* conveys this sense of the distinction between the Holocaust and the Farhūd. The exchange takes place after the brutal hanging of Shafīq 'Adas, the event with which the book begins. The protagonist-writer's father argues with the dove flyer, Abu Edouard, about the role Zionism and particularly Israel has been playing in the recent anti-Jewish violence in Baghdad:

"Have you forgotten the *Farhood*?" asked my father. Hundreds of dead, thousands of injured—is that nothing to you?

43 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IKNhJyR3Co>. An earlier documentary made for Israeli television around 1990 is described by one observer as having "labored mightily to squeeze the story of the Iraqi Jews into the patterns of an Ashkenazi history of pogroms and persecution." Yossi Yonah, "How Right-Wing are the Sephardim?" *Tikkun* (May/June 1990), p. 38.

44 My translations of the Hebrew differ somewhat from the English captions, which take some liberties and do not always convey the exact meaning of the interviewees' words.

"If a Jew didn't forget, he couldn't live. For heaven's sake, the Christians killed six millions! If the Muslims slaughtered a few of us too, that's no more than they do to each other all the time."⁴⁵

Ashkenazi historical memory and assumptions about the fate awaiting Iraqi Jews in 1950-1951 played a role in motivating the Israeli effort to extract them from their country. In his memoirs, Mordechai Ben-Porat recounts conversations at the highest level in Israel leading up to the famous "Operation Ezra and Nehemiah," as the rescue operation was named. Fearing for the lives of the Jews, especially in the aftermath of the Farhūd, the Israeli political leadership, from Ben-Gurion on down—all of them Ashkenazim—expressed worry about another Holocaust in the making on Arab soil. Imposing an Ashkenazi historical conception on the Iraqi situation, they decided to dispatch emissaries in late 1949, with native-born Iraqi Ben-Porat at their helm, to "rescue" the Iraqi Jews before this could happen.⁴⁶

The Historical Memory of the Iraqi Memoirists

Remarkably, none of the memoirists who witnessed the fierce firestorm of the Farhūd and underwent the wrenching experience of permanent exile from their Iraqi homeland a decade later express a historical memory of persecution and anti-Semitism.⁴⁷ Nor do they connect that immediate suffering with a "lachrymose" history of persecution from time immemorial. Seeking an explanation for the traumatic Farhūd, they look, not to anti-Semitism and not to a long history of persecution under Muslim rule, but to the complexities of contemporary political events following the deposal of Rashīd 'Ālī and to the role played by British complacency.

45 Amir, note 12 above, p. 81.

46 Ben-Porat, note 14 above, p. 40, summarizing the view of Ben-Gurion, Weitzman, and others. Preparing himself for the mission, and reading relevant documents, Ben-Porat noticed what he calls an "amazing" tone. He writes, perceptively, that it was probably with "a feeling of remorse, brought on by the realization that not enough was being done to awaken and recruit the Free World against the acts of oppression in Europe, long before the event of mass genocide took place, that the leaders in Israel realized that there was an urgent need to act quickly in Moslem countries," pp. 41-42.

47 Similarly, the Jews from Islamic lands living in France and interviewed by Lucette Valensi in the book *Jewish Memories* (co-authored with Nathan Wachtel; From French: Barbara Harshav, Berkeley 1991), deny that anti-Semitism was a factor in Jewish-Arab relations or motivated anti-Jewish harassment (pp. 227, 229). Nor did it underlie the riots in Algeria in 1934 (pp. 233-240), an episode that may be compared with the Farhūd. By contrast, they remember bitterly the official anti-Semitism of the Vichy regime in North Africa and the anti-Semitism of the European colonialists (pp. 240-242). Similarly, Jews from Salonika speak of the anti-Semitism brought to their city by Greek-Orthodox Christians who arrived in 1922 from Asia Minor during the exchange of Greek and Turkish populations, replacing the more friendly Turks (p. 222).

One of the most vivid descriptions of the Farhūd, by the memoirist Violette Shamash, locates it squarely in the mesh of chaos following the downfall and departure of Rashīd 'Ālī and the Grand Mufti for Iran.⁴⁸ Her account recalls gruesome medieval depictions of anti-Jewish violence during the First Crusade in the German Rhineland in 1096:

Women were raped. Infants were killed in front of their terrified parents before they, too, felt the knife or bullet....Homes were broken into, the mob often torturing and mutilating those they found as a diversion from killing before looting the property and setting it ablaze. Targeting homes where they knew pretty girls lived, soldiers beat up guards employed by the householders....⁴⁹

Looking forward rather than backward, the events of those two days in June 1941, Shamash writes, "would be forever seared in our collective consciousness."⁵⁰ They were all the more shocking because of the friendships Jews had with Muslim neighbors, many of whom defended Jews by offering them shelter until the mayhem passed.⁵¹ Despite the blatant anti-Semitism of Rashīd 'Ālī and the Mufti, there is nothing in the above-quoted passage about anti-Semitism as a factor motivating the perpetrators.⁵² For Shamash, as for the other memoirists, the Farhūd was the *beginning* of persecution, not just a link in a long historical chain: that it would be "forever seared in our collective consciousness" suggests that such a collective memory did not already exist. The Holocaust, by contrast, was seen by Ashkenazi Jews, not as a beginning, but as the *culmination* of centuries of persecution in Christian lands.

48 A long appendix to the book, by her son-in-law, Tony Rocca, the co-editor of the book along with Shamash's daughter, Mira, presents an account of the Farhūd, stressing the culpability of the British in failing to step in to prevent the violence.

49 Shamash, note 21 above, p. 202.

50 Shamash, note 21 above, p. 208.

51 See, for instance, the memoirs of Darwīsh, note 10 above, pp. 59-63, and Sha'ul, note 9 above, pp. 247-248, as well as other memoirs, for instance, Esther Mercado, note 13 above, pp. 6-7. Mordechai Ben-Porat, who, like other memoirists, had many friendships with Muslims when growing up in Baghdad, qualifies this in his memoirs about the operation to save Iraqi Jewry: "I must make it clear that only a minority of Jews had good relations with the Moslems. Most of our people were not involved in the society around them." Ben-Porat, note 14 above, p. 25.

52 In his memoirs, Mordechai Ben-Porat refers to the Farhūd consistently as "the pogrom of Rashid Ali El-Kailani," note 14 above, pp. 66, 114. By sidestepping the political factors described by other memoirists and glossing over the fact that al-Kaylānī had already fled Baghdad for Iran before the beginning of June, Ben-Porat creates the impression that the Farhūd was a planned, Muslim, anti-Semitic pogrom. Black, *The Farhud*, note 39 above, suggests that the Farhūd was a planned, Nazi-inspired pogrom.

In his memoirs, Nissim Rejwan explains the Farhūd in a section called "What Actually Happened":

What exactly happened on that fateful day in 1941 is now fairly well-known and documented. But the chain of events that had led to it, the motives, the blunders, the machinations, the failures, and the foibles that made the event possible and probably inevitable are not and will perhaps never become conclusively clear. Baghdad had fallen to the British and the government of Rashīd 'Ālī was put to flight. Yet the British troops did not enter the city—and the results were disastrous for the Jews and greatly embarrassing both to Britain and to the pro-British regime that succeeded the rebel government.⁵³

The Farhūd occupies a chapter in the memoirs of Badri Fattal. His uncle was kidnapped by a mob and was never heard of again. The family assumed he was killed. In spite of this very personal experience of Muslim violence, Fattal's efforts to explain the Farhūd are entirely local and contemporary, relating it to the fall of the pro-Nazi al-Kīlānī government (no mention of the role of the British). There is no intimation of a role for anti-Semitism; no allusion to Arab or Muslim persecution as a systemic phenomenon rooted in the past.⁵⁴ The same goes for his brother Salim's description of the pogrom, which largely parallels that of his brother. More involved in the politics of protest (in the Communist party) than his brother, however, his account of growing hostility towards the Jews in the 1930s, resulting from Nazi anti-Semitism implanted on Iraqi soil, is more pronounced.⁵⁵

For Na'im Kattan, the pogrom of June 1941, which forms the very starting point of his narrative, was a new phenomenon, not the result of deeply rooted Jew-hatred. As the beginning of a critical change in Jewish-Muslim relations it affected him all the more, accustomed as he was to keeping company with Muslim poets and other writers. His words, however, eschew a lachrymose Jewish collective memory of Islamic persecution and recall a very positive memory of Jewish life in Iraq before the pogrom. "For centuries we had taken pride in living on good terms with the Muslims. Then in just one night, thirteen centuries of shared life

53 Rejwan, note 17 above, p. 131.

54 Fattal, note 26 above, pp. 46-49.

55 His interview in the collection of Morad et al. (eds.), note 18 above, echoes what he wrote in *Besimta'ot Baghdad* regarding anti-Semitic propaganda in Iraq: "Iraq became a center of open Nazi activity, aided by the Mufti of Jerusalem and Arab exiles from Palestine who came to Baghdad. They nurtured an Arab anti-Semitism *such as we had never experienced before*" (p. 85) [emphasis is mine, M. C.].

and neighborliness crumbled like a structure of mud and sand."⁵⁶ Nissim Rejwan seconds this view: "In the long history of this community, indeed, no other event had been so traumatic."⁵⁷

As these memoirists testify, the positive characterization of Jewish-Muslim relations, of "belonging" to Iraqi society, is part of Iraqi Jews' memory of deep roots in their region. Salmān Darwish puts it this way: "The Jews lived with their Muslim brothers in Iraq more than a thousand years in complete security and tranquility, adopting most of their customs, speaking their language, reading their philosophy, poetry, and belles-lettres in classical Arabic and did not use Arabic for speaking or for reading the Torah and the prayers alone."⁵⁸

To a people who felt such a profound rootedness in Iraq's Arab and pre-Arab past, the Farhūd violence came as a rude shock. If, as they do, the memoirists see the pogrom of 1941 as the starting point of a gloomy historical memory rather than the end of a long history of suffering, we may justifiably conclude that their perception was not divorced from historical experience, in the same way that the gloomier Ashkenazi historical memory was rooted in real events of the past.

Many memoirists describe how life began to return to normal after the violence subsided. Doubtless this can be attributed in part at least to the economic recovery resulting from the "commercial boom" during World War II.⁵⁹ The immediate "de-Nazification" of government propaganda also quieted fears. The return of the British also helped. But the memoirs suggest that it was also due to a widespread belief that what happened was an anomaly.⁶⁰

Sasson Somekh, who was eight years old at the time of the Farhūd and whose family was not directly affected by the violence, writes: "The *Farhood*, in spite of its painful effects, was almost erased from the collective Jewish memory (though not, of course, from the memories of individuals and families who suffered personally)."⁶¹ The sense that it was an anomaly was shared by many. Eli Amir writes, for instance, "The Moslems had always been good neighbors. They had looked after us and protected us. We had all drunk from the same well. And then ten years ago, along came the *Farhood*, the anti-Jewish riots,

56 Kattan, note 7 above, p. 13, quoted also by Kazzaz, note 31 above, pp. 61-62.

57 Rejwan, note 17 above, p. 132.

58 Darwish, note 10 above, p. 54.

59 See Shiblak, note 34 above, p. 74; Hayyim J. Cohen, note 34 above, pp. 166, 176.

60 One or another of these explanations can be found in the memories

61 Somekh, note 16 above, pp. 132-133. Cf. Gat, note 34 above, pp. 23-24.

and nothing was quite the same again. But, since daily life had gone back to a semblance of normality, why set up underground groups and run risks for a Jewish country far away?"⁶²

Naim Kattan writes that the return of the British to Baghdad after the quelling of the Rashīd 'Ālī coup, followed by his flight from the country and the punishment of some of the insurgents, inspired a renewed sense of security. "These soldiers [the British troops], who were fighting the Jews' mortal enemy on other fronts [the Nazis], revived our hopes and feeling of security."⁶³ Musing at the end of the War about the hopes of Muslims, Jews, and other minorities for "rebirth through revolution" he tells his reader:

Memories of the *Farhoud* were growing distant. We were united to our Muslim and Christian brothers. At last we were going to forget our distinguishing marks, tear down fences.⁶⁴

Somewhat later, closer to his departure to take up a scholarship to study in France, he gives voice to what appears to be strong evidence of the absence of a historical memory of persecution marking the Farhūd as but the latest in a long chain of suffering.

When we were waiting for our passports after the *Farhoud*, we knew that the worst was over, that we could hope for better days. *That catastrophe was part of the past.*⁶⁵

If the shock of the Farhūd dissipated it was because it could not be correlated with a historical memory of Islamic persecution. The fact that many Muslims had aided Jews, seeking to protect them from the rampaging mobs, must have reassured many that the Farhūd was an exception to the rule. Because it was followed by a renewed sense of security, the events of the late forties, the mounting conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, the hanging of 'Adas in Basra for allegedly aiding Israel, and finally, the laws of 1950 and 1951, leading to the mass exodus of most of Iraqi Jewry to Israel, came as another unexpected shock.

62 Amir, note 12 above, pp. 8-9.

63 Kattan, note 7 above, p. 57.

64 Kattan, note 7 above, p. 149.

65 Kattan, note 7 above, p. 162.

The Historical Knowledge of Iraqi Jews

It might be argued, against the point of view being argued here, that these twentieth-century Iraqi memoirists simply knew very little about their own history and were naively ignorant of centuries of persecution and Islamic anti-Semitism. Alluding to the sparse historical knowledge of the Jews of Iraq, Naïm Kattan himself relates a presumably fictional conversation with Yaacoub Benyamine, "one of the most respected men in the community," a lawyer, professor of law and legal counsel to several local and foreign firms.

He collected every document and was the definitive source of the history of the Jews in Iraq.

As Benyamine was going towards the Club office to telephone I intercepted him. "When are you going to publish your history of the Jews of Iraq," I asked.

He looked at me with an amused smile, barely perceptible. I had to establish my credibility and assure him of my legitimate curiosity.

"I'm a writer myself," I said, without a hint of modesty, "and I'm interested in the past of our community."

In an affable tone, with the cordiality of one who not only takes you seriously, but intends to take you into his confidence, he said, "Unfortunately we don't have a genizah, like the Jews of Cairo. *Our past is virgin territory* and it would take incalculable efforts to clear it. I don't have enough time to do the research."⁶⁶

Some truth underlies this anachronistic anecdote, anachronistic because knowledge of the documents from daily life found in the Cairo Geniza was not widely available in the late 1940s when this conversation supposedly took place. But in actual fact, at the time the memoirists wrote, the Jews of Iraq were not totally ignorant of their past. Though Jewish history was not offered in the curriculum of the Jewish schools after 1940,⁶⁷ people could have read about their history elsewhere. In particular, they had access to the Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela in

⁶⁶ Kattan, note 7 above, p.153.

⁶⁷ The teaching of Jewish history was banned in the Jewish schools in 1940 when the Public Education Law was passed. See Reeva Spector Simon, Michael M. Laskier, and Sara Reguer (eds.), *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, New York 2003, p. 361.

the popular Arabic translation from the Hebrew published in 1945 by the educator Ezra Haddad, and Haddad's bibliography reveals that a considerable number of publications on Jewish history were available in Iraq.⁶⁸ One of the first modern histories of the Jews of Iraq, by David Solomon Sassoon (d. 1942), was published posthumously in England in 1949 and might also have been available.⁶⁹

Forty years after the period portrayed in Na'im Kattan's book, Salmān Darwīsh traced the history of the Jews under Islam in the introductory chapters of his Arabic memoirs. His approach is balanced. He describes periods of security but is nonetheless careful to acknowledge periods of difficulty. Not surprisingly, his account features mainly the history of the Jews in Iraq and other Eastern Islamic lands.

Beginning with the warm reception of Islamic rule by both Jews and Christians during the conquests, Darwīsh goes on, albeit in an extremely brief manner, to enumerate some of the main events. He knows about the integration of Jews into the Islamic economy and the important services performed by Jewish bankers to the Abbasid Caliphs. He "remembers" a difficult moment from Baghdad history in the middle of the ninth century, when the Caliph al-Mutawakkil re-imposed the harsh restrictions of the Pact of 'Umar. He also concedes—as do most Jewish historians today—that Jewish status was not entirely secure but fluctuated with different circumstances and different rulers.

Darwīsh does not forget to describe, with pride, the glorious personage of the Babylonian Exilarch, based on the famous Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela in the twelfth century, which he likely read in Haddad's Arabic translation (many phrases are nearly identical). He includes Benjamin's description of how the Exilarch was honored by Muslims in Baghdad. Darwīsh then turns his attention to the Mongol invasion and sack of Baghdad in 1258, in the wake of which the Jew Sa'd al-Dawla was raised to a lofty position at court. After a brief period of respite, however, the Jews and Christians suffered persecution, and churches and synagogues were destroyed. These events were followed by much more suffering in the fourteenth century in the wake of the Tatar invasions. According to Darwīsh, when the Persian Shiites occupied Baghdad at the beginning of the sixteenth century they granted economic freedom to the Jews. He compares the tolerant policy of the Ottoman Turks, who conquered Baghdad in 1534, to the

68 *Riḥlat Binyāmīn lil-rahḥāla al-rabī Binyāmīn ibn Yāna al-Taṭṭil al-Nibārī al-Andalusī (561-569 h.) wa (1165-1173 m.)*, From Hebrew: Ezra Haddad, Baghdad, 1945. Sasson Somekh informed me that Haddad's translation made a great impact among Baghdad Jews when it appeared.

69 David Solomon Sasson, *A History of the Jews in Baghdad*, Letchworth 1949.

intolerant expulsion of the Jews from the Catholic Iberian Peninsula in 1492, after which the Jews took refuge in the more benevolent Muslim Ottoman Empire. A passage quoted from a Danish traveler in the eighteenth century compares the relative freedom of the Jews of Iraq with the restrictions placed on the Jews of Europe at that time. Darwīsh ends with criticism of Ottoman treatment of the Jews toward the end of Ottoman rule in 1917.⁷⁰

Darwīsh does not generalize the occasional suffering of the Jews of Iraq in the past into a historical memory of persecution. He specifically emphasizes that the attacks on the Jews in June 1941 were not part of a long chain of suffering at Arab hands and were unlike the periodic persecutions of Ashkenazi Jews living in Christian lands. He attributes this difference to the Muslim obligation to protect *dhimmi*s.⁷¹ Unlike Ashkenazi Jews and the descendants of 1492 Sephardi exiles from Spain, the Jews of Iraq had very few other sources in Arabic or Hebrew or commemorative rituals on the basis of which to construct and maintain a collective memory of persecution at the hands of Muslims. Sephardic prayer books typically lacked the medieval Ashkenazi *piyyuṭim* about persecution and martyrdom in ancient and medieval times. Moreover, while the medieval ancestors of twentieth-century Arab Jews wrote thousands of poems imitating Arabic prosody and secular themes, only one such poem describing an episode of Muslim persecution is known. That poem, written by Abraham Ibn Ezra, memorializes the destruction or forced conversion of whole communities in North Africa and Spain by the "fundamentalist" Muslim Almohads in the mid-twelfth century. Characteristic of a very different collective memory of Jewish relations with non-Jews, it only found a place in a Sephardic prayer book after the anti-Semitic pogroms in Reconquista Spain in 1391, when it could be situated in the context of a harsher historical memory of Jewish relations with Christians.⁷²

In general, Jews from the Arab world also lacked medieval chronicles of persecution similar to the records of massacre of Jews in Europe during the First Crusade and during other violent episodes. The so-called "Book of Tradition" (*Sefer ha-qabbala*), a "chronicle" of rabbinic scholars from ancient days to the writing of the book in the mid-twelfth century in Spain, pays only incidental attention to episodes of oppression. In short, these Jews lacked the artifacts of a lachrymose Jewish memory that Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi pointed to in his famous book *Zakhor*.⁷³

70 Darwīsh, note 10 above, pp. 21-25.

71 Darwīsh, note 10 above, p. 54.

72 Cohen, note 2 above, p. 184.

73 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Seattle 1982.

Not until the late Islamic Middle Ages do we begin to find Jewish accounts commemorating acts of persecution or near persecution.⁷⁴ But these were not composed by Jews who were indigenous in the Muslim world. Rather, it was mainly Jews who had recently undergone the traumatic expulsion from Christian Spain in 1492 and had resettled in European and Islamic countries who produced works that could be considered building blocks of a collective lachrymose memory. These Jews had been expelled from the land in which they had lived for many hundreds of years and in which they felt deeply embedded. Despite persecutions and forced conversions in the fifteenth century, they still thought of Spain as their home and believed they were now living, so to speak, in exile from their motherland. Sitting in their new lands, pining for Spain, they constructed a historical memory of a long chain of persecution in order to give meaning to their own experiences.⁷⁵

Had the ancestors of twentieth-century Iraqi Jews experienced generations and centuries of unrelenting persecution under Islam; had the memoirists been bearers of a tradition of such suffering; and had they, therefore, considered the Farhūd part of a systemic, *longue durée* of Muslim anti-Jewish hatred and persecution, it is difficult to believe that they would have ignored that history when writing about the traumas of the twentieth century. If they had known stories of Muslim hatred and oppression in the distant past they would hardly have neglected to retell them at moments of severe persecution in the present. Like the Jews expelled from medieval Spain, they might even have found solace in their plight had they seen it as part of a longer history of Jewish suffering. Yet, even in the 1930s, when Nazi anti-Semitism began to rear its ugly head in the Middle East and in Iraq in particular, our memoirists do not link this with an indigenous, historical Islamic anti-Semitism from ages gone by. The few Iraqi-Jewish poets who wrote about the Farhūd placed the violence in the traditional, retrojected context of Jewish suffering since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.⁷⁶

An exception—a story of "persecution" from the relatively recent past that went recorded by some of the memoirists—proves the rule. In 1917, during the transition between the end of Ottoman control in Iraq and the establishment of the British Mandate, Turks, as Violette Shamash describes the event, rounded

74 Exceptions include the poems and others sources about the persecution of the Jews of Yemen in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, lamenting their temporary expulsion from Ṣan'ā' by the Zaydi-Shiite rulers in the wake of the intense Jewish messianic activity about Sabbatai Zevi in 1666-1667. See Joseph Tobi, *The Jews of Yemen: Studies in their History and Culture*, Leiden 1999, Chapter Four. For other examples see Cohen, note 2 above, p. 188.

75 Yerushalmi, note 73 above, Part Three; Cohen, note 2 above, pp. 188-189.

76 Moreh, "The Pogrom of June 1941," in Moreh and Yehuda (eds.), note 6 above, pp. 212-213.

up many Jewish men, including her own father, as well as members of other minority communities, and deported them to Mosul, "on suspicion of cooperating with the [British] enemy." Many were conscripted, but only a few made it to fight at the front. "Faced with defeat, the Turks turned on the recruits and killed them all."

The most horrific part of this incident is described in gruesome detail.

Finally, when some bankers and moneychangers grumbled about being forced to exchange their gold and silver coins for newly printed, worthless Turkish banknotes, the Turks' answer was simple: they arrested those who resisted, herded them to the Tigris, killed them, and cut up their bodies before dumping them in the river in sacks. It was Tish'a-Bab, the season of mourning.⁷⁷

The reference to the Ninth of Ab, the date of the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem, in 586 BCE and 70 CE, respectively, recalls the Ashkenazi custom of connecting present persecutions with those in the past, though it is doubtful that Violette Shamash actually meant to make such a connection.⁷⁸ Nor are the horrible events described as an anti-Semitic episode, for members of other minority communities were also victimized.

Ezra Zilkha calls the Ottoman episode to mind in his memoirs. His account supports the view that this event, horrible as it was, was not seen by contemporaries as part of a pattern.

Before the Turks left Baghdad, according to my father, they killed about twenty-five of the city's most important bankers and merchants. They took them to the Tigris, tied rocks around their necks and drowned them. Most of the victims were Jewish, *but for the Turks it wasn't a matter of anti-Semitism as much as of greed and vindictiveness*. They wanted to loot Baghdad and leave scorched earth behind them. Father's name was on their list, but he escaped by befriending, and, of course, bribing a Turkish captain.⁷⁹

Though for some (like Violette Shamash), the Turkish atrocity of 1917 took on a

77 Shamash, note 21 above, pp. 22-23.

78 Sasson Somekh informed the present writer that the expression "Tish'a Bab" in the Jewish-Iraqi dialect means simply "a catastrophe."

79 Zilkha, note 15 above, p. 10 [emphasis is mine, M. C.].

cosmic significance ("[i]n 1915 [sic], our paradise came to an abrupt end"),⁸⁰ the memoir literature we have investigated here does not suggest that Arab hostility toward the Jews in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries stemmed from a primal Arab-Muslim anti-Semitism. In their reflections on the precipitous decline in their status in the mid-twentieth century and on the violence perpetrated by Muslims against them, we hear little if any intimation that it was a continuation of attitudes and policies traceable to the earlier centuries of Islam.

Despite the inroads of European anti-Semitism in the Islamic world in the nineteenth century and its particular manifestation in Iraq in the 1930s, the Jews of Iraq experienced no other violence like the Farhūd in the twentieth century. Precisely because of its anomalous nature, and despite growing concern about Muslim anti-Jewish sentiment that followed, many Jews seem to have forgotten the seriousness of the Farhūd until the ignominious Arab defeat by Israel in 1948-1949 revived Muslim antagonism and led to discriminatory state policies at the end of the forties. But the memoirists do not describe attitudes and behavior that could qualify as real anti-Semitism. An anti-Semitic episode related by Violette Shamash occurs, characteristically, in an anecdote about an exchange between a Jewish jeweler ("jewellery was the specialty of the Jews," she notes), and a *Christian* customer. Dissatisfied with a flaw in the golden crucifix the Jew had made for her, the woman blurts out: "As if it wasn't enough that you Jews killed Jesus, now you've deformed his image!"⁸¹

Conclusion

The memoirs of Iraqi Jews who left their homeland in 1950 and 1951 or later, or of their children writing about them, reveal no long-term memory of historical suffering. We find no attempt to link either the Farhūd or the exodus in 1950-1951 to past persecution in Iraq or in any other Islamic land, or to characterize the Farhūd itself as an event within the framework of the Holocaust, a theme that has found its way into Zionist historiography.⁸² This compels the conclusion that the Jews of Iraq lacked a historical memory of suffering like that of their Ashkenazi brethren.

The sudden eruption of a pogrom in June 1941 and its aftermath a decade later had no precedent on which to construct a new and gloomy historical memory. If the persecutions of the crusades and the anti-Semitic beliefs and actions of Christians in medieval Latin Europe fostered a "lachrymose" Ashkenazi memory

80 Shamash, note 21 above, p. 21.

81 Shamash, note 21 above, p. 13.

82 Shenhav, note 4 above, p. 140.

in medieval and modern times; if the expulsion of the Sephardi Jews from Catholic Spain in 1492 and the feeling of exile that followed gave rise to a historical memory of persecution for those Jews, it is because there was substantial basis in fact for the existence of Christian Jew-hatred and persecution in the past. If, by contrast, the Jews of Iraq, who experienced a similar wave of anti-Semitism in the 1930s, a pogrom in 1941, and, ten years later, a tragic void upon leaving their ancient and beloved homeland, did not express similar views about their past in their memoirs, that is because there was little if any basis in historical fact for "remembering" a bleak, earlier history. If, again in contrast with Ashkenazi historical memory, the Jews of Iraq "forgot" actual instances of persecution in earlier Islamic centuries, it was because they were occasional, episodic, atypical, and, with few exceptions, did not reach the level of violence and hatred characteristic of the Jewish historical experience in Ashkenazi lands.

This, then, is the message of the memoir literature, and if it differs from the often more dismal testimony of some Iraqi Jews living in Israel or elsewhere, that can be explained, I suggest, in a number of ways. Understandably, for many, the memory of difficult times in Israel upon arrival; the sub-standard transit camps; the contrast between their middle-class comfort and high level of education in Iraq and the less fortunate circumstances in which they initially found themselves in Israel; the obstacles and prejudices they encountered in Israel upon arrival; and their slow climb from marginalization to integration in Israel and ultimately to success in Israeli society—all of this disposed some Iraqi Jews living in Israel to "remember" an even harsher life in Iraq and to characterize the violent persecutions of the 1940s and early 1950s as part of a larger, systemic anti-Jewish phenomenon. (Of course, for many, this works the opposite way; nostalgically, they "remember" *happier* times in their home countries in contrast to their suffering as new immigrants in Israel.) Some may feel the need to rationalize the sudden loss of their comfortable life in Iraq by blaming that loss on those traumatic events, rather than on circumstances accompanying their difficult absorption into Israel. This construction of the past comes close to the Ashkenazi historical memory of suffering followed by redemption in the State of Israel. It helps Jews from Iraq and other Arab lands identify with the master narrative of Jewish (and Zionist) history, an obvious attempt to "compete" with European Jews for a doleful historical memory and to claim a larger piece of the Zionist dream than the Ashkenazi founders of Israel and their descendants have traditionally granted them. In particular, Iraqi-Jewish attempts to situate the Farhūd within the context of Nazi persecution serves as a counter-argument to the well known Arab complaint that they had no part in the Holocaust and thus should not be made to pay the price for Christian and Nazi persecution of the Jews in Europe by accepting a Jewish state in their midst.

Not surprisingly, many demonstrate their commitment and loyalty to Israeli society by taking a hard line on Israel's Arab foes and by calling attention to their mistreatment by Arab "enemies" in their countries of origin. For some, the historical claim of Arab persecution in Iraq, more generally invoked with respect to Jews from all Arab countries, supports a demand for restitution, or, related to that, an argument about "exchange of populations" which counter-balances Arab demands that Israel compensate the Palestinian refugees.⁸³ Finally, many Iraqi and other Arab Jews wish to prove to the Ashkenazi founders of the State of Israel and their descendants that they, too, had a "lachrymose" past of suffering, climaxing at approximately the same time that the Holocaust was destroying European Jewry.

The memoirists I have read present a less tendentious point of view about their past. I would argue that the historical memory of coexistence between Jews and Muslims in Iraq that is inscribed in the vast majority of the written memoirs was both consistent with these Arab Jews' personal experience of decent relations with their Muslim neighbors in their own time and constructed on a substantially accurate recall of relations between Jews and Muslims in former times. That accounts for the fact that many of our memoirists saw the Farhūd, as shocking and violent as it was, as an exceptional episode in the *longue durée* of relatively peaceful interreligious relations in Iraq. It seems difficult to escape the conclusion, therefore, that the "neo-lachrymose" counter-memory of Islamic persecution that is professed by many historians and by some Iraqi Jews living in Israel is an invention of the present.

Princeton University

83 Recently (end of 2011), according to news reports, the Israeli government established a new department in the Pensioners' Affairs Ministry to collect claims for property lost by Jewish refugees when they fled or were expelled from Arab countries and Iran. See, for instance, <http://www.jpost.com/LandedPages/PrintArticle.aspx?id=130855>. This has been the goal of advocacy groups like WOJAC and JIMENA for years, and it is typically backed up by historical accounts of Arab persecution.