

What Happened to Pakistan's Jews?

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Pakistan was never traditionally antisemitic. In fact, it may come as a surprise that Pakistan hosted small, yet thriving, Jewish communities from the 19th century until the end of the 1960s. Recently, Yoel Reuben, a Pakistani Jew living in the Israeli town of Lod whose family originated in Lahore, documented some of the history of the Jewish communities with photographs of original documents. When India and Pakistan were one country, before the partition in 1947, the Jews were treated with tolerance and equality. In the first half of the 20th century, there were nearly 1,000 Jewish residents in Pakistan living in different cities: Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta, and Lahore. The largest Jewish community lived in Karachi, where there was a large synagogue and a smaller prayer hall. There were two synagogues in Peshawar, one small prayer hall in Lahore belonging to the Afghan Jewish community, and one prayer hall in Quetta. Even today, according to unofficial sources, there are rumors that some Jews remain in Pakistan, including doctors and members of the free professions, who converted or pass themselves off as members of other religions.

The Jews of Pakistan were of various origins, but most were from the Bene Israel community of India, and came to Pakistan in the employ of the British. Yifah, a student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, relates that her great-great-grandfather Samuel Reuben Bhonkar, who was a Bene Israel, came to Karachi in British India to work as a jailer, and died there in 1928. The Bene Israel originated in the Konkan villages, but many moved to Bombay from the end of the 18th century on. In Pakistan, they spoke Marathi, their mother tongue from Maharashtra; Urdu, the local language; and most spoke English. Prayers were conducted in Hebrew.

In 1893, a Bene Israel from Bombay, Solomon David Umerdekar, inaugurated the Karachi Magen Shalom Synagogue on the corner of Jamila Street and Nishtar Road, which officially opened in 1912. During these years, the Jewish community thrived. In 1903, the community set up the Young Man's Jewish Association, and the Karachi Bene Israel Relief Fund was established to support poor Jews. In 1918, the Karachi Jewish Syndicate was formed to provide housing at reasonable rents, and the All India Israelite League, which represented 650 Bene Israel living in the province of Sind (including Hyderabad, Larkuna, Mirpur-Khas, and Sukkur, as well as Karachi), was first convened—founded by two prominent Bene Israel, Jacob Bapuji Israel and David S. Erulkar. Karachi became a fulcrum for the Bene Israel in India, the place where they congregated for High Holiday prayers. There was also a prayer hall, which served the Afghan Jews resid-

ing in the city. A 1941 government census recorded 1,199 Pakistani Jews: 513 men and 538 women. So accepted were the Jews of Karachi in these years that Abraham Reuben, a leader in the Jewish community, became the first Jewish councilor on the Karachi Municipal Corporation.

ANTI-ZIONISM BEGINS

On August 15, 1947, India was partitioned and the Dominion of Pakistan was declared. Partition effectively signaled the end of the British Empire. Fearful of their future in the new Islamic state, Jews began to flee. Some fled from Afghanistan; the Bene Israel community in Lahore fled to Karachi and from there moved to Bombay. Muslim refugees from India, called Mohajir, streamed into Pakistan and attacked Jewish sites. The situation was exacerbated by the declaration of independence for the state of Israel in May 1948. Many of the Karachi Jews left the city in 1948, after rioters attacked the Karachi synagogue during a demonstration in May of that year against President Truman's recognition of Israel. Some members of the community emigrated to Israel via India, while others settled in Canada and the United Kingdom.

Pogroms against the Jews recurred during the Suez War in 1956 and the Six-Day War in 1967. Most of the remaining Jews emigrated and, in 1968, the Pakistani Jewish community numbered only 350 in Karachi, with one synagogue, a welfare organization, and a recreational organization. After 1968, there is no record of any Pakistani Jews outside Karachi.

Today, anti-Israel discourse manifests itself in the notion that Israel and Pakistan are ultimately in competition and thus only one can flourish. In April 2008, Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul, the former chief of Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence, proclaimed that "two states came into existence in 1947 and 1948: one, Pakistan; two, Israel. The two are threats to each other. Ultimately, only one of them will survive." Pakistan aligns itself with the Palestinian Muslim cause and rejects the United States insofar as it is allied with Israel.

THE KARACHI JEWISH COMMUNITY ENDS

The Magen Shalom synagogue in Karachi was destroyed on July 17, 1988, by order of Pakistan President Zia-Ul-Hak to make way for a shopping mall in the Ranchore Lines neighborhood of Karachi. In 1989, the original ark and podium were stored in Karachi; a Torah scroll case was taken by an American to the United States.

As late as 2006, the sole survivor of the Karachi Jewish community, Rachel Joseph, a former teacher, then 88 years old, was battling for com-

2011]

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703

pensation for the broken promise from the property developers that had demolished the old synagogue: in exchange, she would receive an apartment, and a new small synagogue would be constructed on the old site. While the litigation wore on, she languished in a tiny room.

This year, a Muslim Pakistani-American filmmaker, Shoeb Yunus, shot a film about the Jewish cemetery in Karachi. Today, it is part of the larger Cutchi Memon graveyard, which has a Muslim caretaker. It took Yunus eight months to gain admission, and the camera crew was allowed only 10 minutes to shoot. He estimates that there are 200-400 Jewish graves. The neglected cemetery has not been destroyed since its last custodian, Rachel Joseph, died on July 17, 2006.

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