



Return to Baghdad

A new film uncovers Baghdad's rich Jewish history. **Lyn Julius** reports on a community unwilling to sever their ties with the past

On New Year's Eve 1946, a young Jewish couple were among the guests at a benefit ball in Baghdad. As part of the event, a beauty pageant was taking place. The Prince Regent of Iraq, a guest at the event, approached the couple and invited 21-year-old Renée Sassoon (soon to be Dangoor) to take part in the pageant.

Renée won the contest. Her hand-coloured image of radiant beauty, complete with victory sash, is presently referenced by 2,700 Arabic websites on Google.

Who would have believed, in the bomb-ravaged, sectarian Iraq of today, that a Jew could have been crowned Miss Baghdad 1947? "Who is even going to believe", says Edwin Shuker in the new documentary Remember Baghdad, "that there were Jews in Iraq?"

The opening sequence shows Edwin leaving his home in north London to catch a flight to Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan

in northern Iraq, in a bid to show that Jews still have a stake in Iraq. Later, we see Edwin in a Baghdadi taxi excitedly giving his driver directions to find the Shuker family house. They had abandoned it in haste 46 years earlier.

In a region where the jihadists of IS are just kilometres away, to return to Iraq is a brave, if foolhardy, project for a Jew. Of 140,000 Jews in 1948, only five remain in Iraq in an atmosphere of rampant antisemitism. This community goes back to Babylonian times, when captives from Judaea were taken as slaves to the land of the two rivers. Their descendants remained there for 2,600 years. Babylonian Jews had a seminal impact on Judaism, yet in 2017

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the community is virtually extinct, its members driven into exile.

Remember Baghdad started out as a film commissioned by Renée Dangoor's son, David, about a group of Iraqi Jews who have been meeting weekly in London over three decades to play volleyball. Director Fiona Murphy has taken the story to a new level, combining raw material of home movies, family photos and first-person testimonies with rare archive footage to build a cinematic record of a lost world.

What motivated Fiona, who discovered as an adult she had Jewish heritage, to make this film? "The lives of my parents' families closed down as the British Empire shattered: my father's community was thrown out of Ireland and my mother's fled Jamaica. I grew up in London, conscious that people suffer for the crimes of generations long gone.

"When I was offered a job cataloguing an extraordinary archive of early home movies belonging to an Iraqi Jewish family, I responded vividly to the news that the Jews of Iraq did well under the British, and paid for it. At first I just wanted to convey the pain of losing your home. It seemed important to push back at the narrowness of our news, dominated by discussion of economic migrants, desperate refugees and the difficulties of integrating immigrants. I wanted to show that migrants travel with heavy hearts, to give them a voice, and bring back the world that was lost."

Up until the 1930s, Jews dominated Iraq's finance and trade and administered its railways and communications. The financier Sassoon Eskell even became the country's first finance minister. But the golden age of the Jews of Iraq was cut short by the creeping Nazification of the 1930s, culminating in the traumatic pogrom



known as the pro-Nazi farhud (farhud is Arabic for forced dispossession) in 1941, and the death of King Faisal.

The film includes interviews with the broadcaster Salim Fattal, the writer Eli Amir, and other survivors of the two-day rampage of June 1941, which followed the overthrow of the pro-Nazi government in Iraq – an orgy of killing, rape and looting. After Iraq introduced a state of emergency in 1948, punishing its Jews for the establishment of Israel, it was primarily fear of another farhud that spurred 120,000 Jews to leave Iraq for Israel when they had the chance in 1950–51. The price they paid was to be stripped of their citizens' rights and dispossessed of their property.

Although Iraq remained an implacable enemy of Israel, life for the 7,000 remaining Jews continued as one long round of parties and picnics by the river Tigris. The brutal slaughter of the king and his ministers in 1958, their bodies dragged through the streets of Baghdad, came as a shock, but still many Jews did not leave. When they wanted to, in the 1960s, it was too late. By the time the Six Day War broke out, Jews were effectively hostages of the Ba'ath regime.

The film relates the vengeful terror experienced by the remaining Jews, who witnessed the public hangings of nine of their co-religionists in January 1969 on trumped-up spying charges. Danny Dallal's

Clockwise from top left: In 1946 Renée Sassoon was crowned Miss Baghdad in the country's first beauty contest; Baghdad in the 1950s; photo belonging to Esperance Ben-Moshe, who left Baghdad for Israel. This shows her friends in Israel soon after she arrived in the country

uncle was executed six months later. Scores of Jews disappeared. Danny and Edwin were among the 2,000 desperate Jews smuggled out of Iraq into Iran by Kurds in the early 1970s. They left everything behind.

The film closes with Edwin Shuker signing the contract for the home he has just purchased on a windswept and arid development in Kurdistan. Will he ever live in it? It's clearly a symbolic act – perhaps

"Edwin's new house is on a windswept Kurdistan development"

the first step on the ladder to buying a property in Baghdad – in order to show the unbreakable bond between Jews and their 2,600 years in the land. You can take the Jew out of Iraq, but you can't take Iraq out of the Jew. As David Dangoor, whose family

finally left the country in 1959, says in the film, "Iraq is in our bones." But is it? Many Iraqi Jews still suffer nightmares at the thought of what they went through. The memory of Iraq recedes year by year. Their children and grandchildren, now citizens of Israel and the West, barely understand Arabic: only the food links them with the past. They have moved on. Perhaps Remember Baghdad should have a question mark after it? ■

For details of future screenings of Remember Baghdad, sign up for the mailing list at: rememberbaghdad.com. Remember Baghdad has evolved from Fiona Murphy's earlier film, Volleyball Players from Baghdad, which will be shown on Tuesday 22 June at the Jewish Museum London. www.jewishmuseum.org.uk. Lyn Julius is the co-founder of Harif, an association of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa. www.harif.org.



Letters from Baghdad

A new film on Gertrude Bell highlights her relationship with Iraq's Jews. **Lyn Julius** reports

Exactly 100 years ago the British invaded what was once Mesopotamia, throwing three Ottoman provinces together to form modern Iraq. One of the chief architects behind that act was the British intelligence officer Gertrude Bell. Now she is the subject of Letters from Baghdad, another documentary focusing on Baghdad that is out this year.

Often described as a female Lawrence of Arabia, Bell was a woman in a man's world. She was the moving force behind the crowning of Emir Faisal as king of Iraq and saw the able, multilingual, educated and increasingly westernised Jews as the lynchpin of the brave new Iraq she wanted to create.

"I'm now going to cultivate the Jewish community – there are 80,000 in Baghdad out of a population of 200,000 – and find out more about them," Bell wrote to her parents in 1917, in a letter voiced in the film by Tilda Swinton. Bell continues, "So far, I've only met the bigwigs, such as the Chief Rabbi. There's no doubt they will be a great power here some day."

Jews did indeed become the backbone of the British mandate of Iraq. But Bell was sidelined in discussions over the country's future, and is thought to have ended her own life in frustration, aged only 52.

"One of Bell's most inspiring qualities was her openness to other cultures. She was very admiring of the ancient Jewish community in Baghdad," said Zeva Oelbaum, who directed the film with Sabine Krayenbühl. ■

Letters from Baghdad opens on 21 April at venues across the UK. For details see: vivaverve.com/letters-from-baghdad.