

A Brief History of Jews in Singapore

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Newly founded by the British in 1819, Singapore was intended to be a trading post for both international and regional commerce. Among the earliest to arrive were the Jews, who settled at the mouth of the Singapore River. For them, the entirely new settlement of 19th century Singapore represented a new opportunity and a completely fresh start. Jewish merchants from India and Persia had been actively trading in the region for centuries. However, around 1817, a new wave of Jewish migrants fled to India to escape persecutions by the Ottomans in Persia, joining a local community that had been established earlier.

One of the earliest Singapore records indicated there were only nine Jews in Singapore in 1830.¹ By 1841, the British census of the time showed that the community had grown to 22. A small group of six Jewish men had written to the governing British to request a place for worship and burial. Granted a place near Boat Quay and the Singapore River, without further ado, with neither rabbi nor many families, the small community proceeded to make up the congregation of the first synagogue of Singapore. With this synagogue and burial grounds granted further off as a foothold, the community of Jews in Singapore started to grow as rapidly as the business in the fledgling port. Jewish wives and families were sent for when the living conditions of the port town improved, forming the first clusters of Singapore Jewish homes in the old town area by the river.

The melting pot of Singapore allowed for close interactions between communities, as seen through the account of an East India Company surveyor, John Turnbull Thomson, who was invited to dine with Abraham Solomon, a wealthy merchant and leader of the Jewish community in early Singapore. While this episode seems unremarkable at first glance, one must remember that the two men would never have sat at the same table other than in Singapore at that time. Separated by kosher laws, race and station, the Baghdadi Jewish merchant and the British civil servant would not have had the chance to develop relations, except in Singapore's flexible and small social landscape.

1. Joan Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore* (Singapore: Suntree Media, 2007), p. 21.

Solomon's house was located within walking distance of the original synagogue by the river. There, Thomson and Solomon ate a kosher, but western-styled meal, accompanied by champagne and coffee. Solomon explained some Jewish practices to his guests, showing Thomson a beautifully written Torah that, in accordance with Jewish law, the British was instructed not to touch. Showing each other cordial intercultural consideration, Thomson was impressed by Solomon's stories of Baghdad as well as his commercial success in Singapore.

Solomon led the community of Jews in Singapore through the 19th century until his death in 1884. During this time, there was both tremendous change as well as growth in the Singapore Jewish community. The rapidly developing economy of early Singapore attracted many people to settle and conduct all sorts of businesses, moving beyond and also out of the original opium and spices trade. Among these were Jewish merchants from India as well as more Baghdadi Jewish migrants. An 1846 census showed that the Jewish community owned six out of then forty-three merchant houses in Singapore. In 1869, the opening of the Suez Canal led to the arrival of more Jews from Europe, adding to the numbers of the Jewish community.

The thriving business of Singapore was attractive to many and, in 1873, a young Baghdadi Jew, Manasseh Meyer, arrived from Calcutta. He would later become the leader of the Jewish community and his commercial success would leave a lasting legacy for generations. By then, the original synagogue by the Singapore River had become too crowded for the growing numbers of Jews. While wealthy Jews moved to other less crowded parts of the town, the majority of migrant Jews formed an enclave around the Sophia Road area. When permission to sell the old synagogue and purchase a plot of land for a new synagogue was sought, Meyer, newly-arrived in Singapore, helped his community to secure approval from the British government. The location of the new synagogue would be at Waterloo Street, within walking distance from the Sophia Road area where many Jews lived so that the Sabbath and holy days could be observed without riding. Maghain Aboth Synagogue at Waterloo Street was completed in 1878 and remains the main Jewish synagogue of Singapore to this day.

Singapore's Jewish community grew and developed apace with the general peace and good fortune of 19th century Singapore. The open business conditions, freedom of religion and multicultural diversity of the island port provided commercial opportunities for an increasingly entrepreneurial population. Some wealthy merchants were able to amass colossal riches, while others were able to secure employment and elevate themselves and their families out of hardship and poverty. Education in English also was progressively available as schools began to open for both boys and girls.

While the Jews of Singapore kept their Sephardi customs and orthodox practices, the middle class of the community began to integrate with the Europeans and British in dress and lifestyle. The influx of Ashkenazi Jews from Western Europe and Russia did not have much impact on the lives of the existing Jewish community who lived in the Sophia Road area. The Ashkenazi's' European heritage and connections led them to work with Western firms, hence, their lives did not overlap much with the Jews with Baghdadi roots. However, both the Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews attended the synagogue and observed the holy days and services together.

By the turn of the century, major Jewish businesses in Singapore had diversified into the new commodities of rubber, tin and textiles. Wealthy Jewish businessmen also invested in real estate and the stock market. Smaller-sized Jewish businesses also prospered by opening shops or general import-export trading. The less affluent orthodox Baghdadi migrant community swelled in the Jewish area, upholding their culture and traditions, while doing small-scale trading in spices and goods door-to-door, at stalls or in the market. Maghain Aboth Synagogue was filled up with congregation, especially during festivals as numbers increased. Therefore, Manasseh Meyer, patriarch of the community, planned for the construction of his own place of worship by Belle Vue, his house at Oxley Rise. His Chesed-El Synagogue was open to all upon completion in 1905 and remains in use to this day. While Maghain Aboth Synagogue remained the centre of community worship and activities, everyone was welcomed to join the services at Chesed-El, some distance from the Jewish cluster, with Meyer often hosting activities at Belle Vue. Later on, he also built Talmud Torah Hebrew School at 22B Bencoolen Street, near Maghain Aboth Synagogue, for all Jewish boys to receive teaching in Hebrew and prepare for their *bar mitzvah* when they came of age. After World War Two, girls also benefitted from education in Hebrew at the school.

Even though there were more Jews in Singapore than ever, there were differences in the lives of the rich and poor, whose interactions were limited by status, wealth and lifestyle. The social gap grew wider between the affluent Jewish business families and the poorer immigrant Jews. While the Baghdadi lifestyle was preserved in the Jewish area around Sophia Road, richer and more successful Jews lived further away and emulated the colonial British and Europeans, leading stylish lives while keeping their traditional customs and faith.

Singapore was mostly unaffected by World War One, and business generally continued to thrive with opportunities available for enterprise. The Singapore Jewish community contributed to international Zionist fundraising such as efforts led by the likes of Albert Einstein and Israel Cohen. Even though there were tales of growing antisemitic movements coming out of Europe, it was largely absent in multicultural, multi-ethnic and multifaith Singapore, where all Jews were accepted and wealthy Jews had close to colonial status. A year before his death in 1930, King George V knighted Manasseh Meyer, the patriarch of Singapore Jews, for his public service and good works.

The 1930s Great Depression had an impact on the price of tin and rubber in Singapore. Nevertheless, as many Jewish businesses had diversified into other areas and real estate, its economic impact on the community was largely neutral. In 1934, then a young man in his 20s, David Marshall, Singapore's first Chief Minister, started a magazine for Singapore Jews with some of his young friends. Even though the publication ceased in 1937, it heralded the beginning of his community activities and leadership in the future. During this time, Marshall became the first Jewish man from Singapore to complete his legal studies and be called to the bar in London. He returned in 1937 to become a criminal trial lawyer.

However, the world was about to change with the outbreak of World War Two. Migrant Jews from Europe began to arrive in Singapore, bringing numbers up to some 2,000. While war broke out in Europe, the Pacific War engulfed most of Asia and consumed Singapore too. On 7 December 1941, without warning, in the middle of the night, bombs started to fall as air raids by the Japanese started the Pacific War. As the Japanese occupied Malaya and drew closer to Singapore, many of the Singapore Jewish community evacuated the island in haste. Many women and children who had connections with Indian Jews, especially in Bombay,

fled on ships to India. The Japanese stormed into Singapore from Malaya and the unprepared British surrendered on 15 February 1942. Thus began the Japanese Occupation of Singapore.

From a population of some 1,500 Jews who lived in pre-Occupation Singapore, there were only approximately 600 to 700 remaining when the Japanese took over the island. The much diminished community watched in horror as the Japanese culled the Chinese in a massacre of unknown thousands. Between 5,000 and 25,000 Chinese men in Singapore were rounded up and machine-gunned to death. Random disappearances, beheading, whipping, executions, abduction and torture were used to freeze any resistance to the Japanese. Initially treated as neutral, the Singapore Jews were ordered to register themselves at Orchard Road Police Station after a month of the Occupation. There, they received white armbands with a red stripe bearing their names, registration numbers, and the Japanese word *Uta* which means Jew.²

Food ran scarce and a black market of goods started to thrive with the Japanese “banana money” replacing the Singapore currency. While industry and business dried up, some Jews were able to sell their jewellery, watches, paintings and other goods to get by; others were not so fortunate. Local people were reduced to selling tea or spices in the market. Tapioca and other vegetables were planted for food as rice and other food were rationed since Singapore had imported almost all its foodstuff. Information was controlled by the Japanese who were punitive without tolerance. More than ever, the Jews gathered around Maghain Aboth Synagogue for prayer, community, and exchange of news, and collections were made to help the poorest. Despite their alliance with Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, the Japanese initially treated the Jews with respect and undertook not to interfere with the practice of their Jewish faith.

But that lasted only a year. On 5 April 1943, about a hundred Jewish men were suddenly rounded up and interned at Changi jail. This exercise was purportedly the result of some Jews making a gesture to the officers of a German ship that had arrived in Singapore.³ The rest of the 500- to 600-strong community remained free. The interned men were still able to observe prayers and holy days within the camp where they occupied a section. Food was just sufficient at first and the overcrowded conditions were improved

² Bieder, *The Jews*, p. 98.

³ Bieder, *The Jews*, p. 101.

somewhat by the ingenuity of the earlier internees. The situation changed after 10 October 1943, when the Japanese clamped down on the Changi internee camp on suspicion of radio intelligence being broadcast from within. Food rations were cut to starvation level and from then on all went hungry. By the last months of the Occupation, the internees were dying of malnutrition.

The Jewish men, women and children left outside had to make do with ever harder conditions in Singapore as supplies of everything, from medicines to food, also began to run out. On 1 May 1944, the Japanese moved civilian prisoners, including the interned Jewish men, from the camp in Changi prison to a camp at Sime Road at the former Royal Air Force headquarters. There, they were allowed to have family visits for half an hour on Sundays. Allied air raids began to strike Singapore in November 1944, raising hopes of rescue as well as fears of reprisals on the population from the Japanese. Then late in 1944, the Jewish internees were told to build six new huts that could accommodate one hundred each for themselves and other internees. The rest of the Jewish community were ordered to report to the Sime Road camp on 25 March 1944. They would spend the last six months of the war there.

On 12 September 1944, the Japanese surrendered. The Jewish internees, however, remained at the camp a few more weeks, for, even though the British military had returned to Singapore, the town was devastated and they had nowhere to go. The times were chaotic and hard but the Torah scrolls were unscathed and the synagogues were returned to the community. Before the return of the Singapore Jewish community leaders, the Jews organised themselves with Fred Isaacs, EB Solomon and EM Sharbanee taking their place to see to the poor, recoup community finances, and manage the synagogues. In 1946, David Marshall returned as a hero to Singapore after recovering from hard labour in Hokkaido, where he was interned alongside the colonial Allied forces during the war. Forbidden to enlist to participate in the war effort, he and Charles Simon had joined the Singapore Volunteer Corps, a Straits Settlements volunteer force formed by the British. Simon had been transported to work on the infamous Thai-Burma Death Railway, while Marshall was sent to Hokkaido. Against huge odds, they endured horrific conditions and survived the war. Soon after, the Jewish Welfare Association (now the Jewish Welfare Board) was established on 27 June 1946 at a meeting chaired by Marshall.

The mission of the new association was to care for Jewish community welfare as well as religious, educational, charitable and cultural activities. It played a vital role in the Singapore Jewish community. Over the next few years, the association helped the poor survive and also assisted those wishing to emigrate and make a fresh start. The war had interrupted the education of the young, and, without a rabbi, the international Habonim youth movement took root in post-war Singapore to cheer and encourage some 80 younger community members with religious, educational and scouting activities. For some who had only heard about Palestine, the first time they learnt about the state of Israel was through their Habonim activities and their imagination was captured by the possibility of living in the new Jewish state.

Over 100 Jews in Singapore made *Aliyah* to Israel after the war. The community numbers dwindled, but the arrival of Rabbi Jacob Shababo from Egypt in 1949 gave spiritual leadership to those who stayed in Singapore. The young people started their own Menorah Club that served to organise fun, social activities for them as well as the rest of the community. Talmud Torah school also resumed classes in the 1950s against a backdrop of political changes that were about to change the destiny of Singapore.

Besides taking charge of the Jewish Welfare Association from 1946 to 1952, David Marshall also pursued a brilliant legal career and entered political life. In 1947, he helped form the Progressive Party, a conservative group that was aligned with British interests. Disgruntled by the British, he left the party by 1952 to lead the Labour Front Party, a coalition of labour splinter groups. Leading with his eloquence, neutrality and wits, Marshall was able to bring various factions together in unity against British rule. The end of an era of Singapore as a colony approached with local elections in April 1955.

With his outspoken criticism of British rule, Marshall struck a chord with ordinary voters who were tired of colonialism. The Labour Front won the elections with a majority, with Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party coming in second. Thus, Marshall, a Singapore Jew, became the first elected Chief Minister of Singapore. Between David Marshall and Lee Kuan Yew, their parties fuelled a local fervour for independence, based on resentment of colonial imperialism and racial discrimination. After pushing for total self-government, Marshall stepped down from office in April 1956 after the British refused Singapore the veto over its defence. While Marshall gave voice to the wishes of the people of Singapore for self-

determination, it was Lee and his People's Action Party that forged a unified, multilingual, multiracial Singapore which would fulfil many of the ideas that they had originally incubated.

As the Singapore economy began to boom once more in the post-war years, the Jewish community in Singapore slowly began to grow, too, with returning Jews as well as the arrival of expatriate Jews from the west. While the original Singapore Baghdadi community did not ever fully regroup after the war, newer members of the community joined. The Jews in Singapore came to prominence in finance, law, medicine and business as well as specialist fields in fashion, jewellery amongst others. Jacob Ballas was one such example of an individual whose rags-to-riches journey propelled him to the chair of the Singapore Stock Exchange. The contributions of the Jews in Singapore to the development of the island-nation have been disproportionately huge compared to their actual small numbers in relation to the rest of the Singapore population.

Recognition for the Jews by the government of Singapore came after David Marshall's death in 1995. Maghain Aboth and Chesed-El synagogues were recognised as national monuments in 1997 and 1998 respectively for their spiritual and architectural value. A public exhibition of the Jews in Singapore was held at the former Singapore History Museum for six months in 1999. The community celebrated the 125th anniversary of Maghain Aboth Synagogue in 2004 with Singapore's President SR Nathan, diplomatic dignitaries, Singapore's Inter-Religious Organisation, and rabbis from around the world.

Since 2007, the community now also meets for activities at Jacob Ballas Centre built by the Jacob Ballas Estate next to Maghain Aboth Synagogue. The Jews in Singapore are an accepted part of the diverse community of Singapore and remain distinct for keeping the Jewish faith, traditional customs, and family values. As blessings are always said in the synagogue for the Republic of Singapore, the State of Israel, and the congregation, the Jews of Singapore continue to go about their busy lives in peace to this day.

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