

IRAQ.

The Jewish community of ancient Babylonia - whose territory was part of what is now Iraq - dates back to the period of the First Temple. For hundreds of years the Jews of Babylonia constituted the largest and most important Jewish community in the world, containing the leadership of the Jewish people as a whole.

In the late 1920s the Jewish community of Iraq numbered some 120,000, most of them living in Baghdad (90,000) and Basra (10,000), and the rest in Mosul, Kirkuk, Sulaimaniyah, Irbil, and various small towns and villages, representing 2.5 percent of the total population (25 percent of the population of Baghdad). By the 1930s, the community was well organized and played an active part in the economy and the general life of the country - more so than the Jews of other countries in the East.

A critical juncture in the situation of the Jews occurred in October 1932, when the British Mandate came to an end and Iraq declared its independence. This was a turn for the worse, which was exacerbated with the death of King Faisal I, in September 1933. In the eight years that followed Faisal's death, Iraq experienced five military coups. Iraqi nationalism was on the rise and consolidating its strength, and it was marked by hatred of foreigners and members of the minorities. One of the manifestations of this attitude was the brutal slaughter of the Assyrian Christian minority in Iraq, in the summer of 1933.

The internal upheavals taking place in Iraq coincided with the Nazi rise to power in Germany, Nazi propaganda in Iraq, and the growing tension in Arab-Jewish relations in Palestine. In October 1932 Fritz Grobba, an Orientalist, was appointed German minister to Baghdad, and he succeeded in skillfully adapting Nazi propaganda to the Iraqis' expectations. The German legation acquired an Iraqi daily, *Al-Alim al-Arabi*, which, beginning in October 1933, serialized Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*, and published propaganda pieces

praising the fascist regimes. Members of the intelligentsia and army officers were invited to Germany as guests of the Nazi party. Radical nationalist organizations inspired by Fascist ideology were established, such as the Arab Cultural Society, in 1931, and the Mutana Ibn Hartha Society in 1935 (the latter named after the commander of the first Muslim force that invaded Iraq). In 1938 the Al-Futuwwa youth organization sent a delegate to the Nuremberg Nazi party rally, and in turn hosted the Hitler Youth leader Baldur von Schirach in Baghdad. In 1939 all students attending secondary schools, as well as their teachers, were obliged to join Al-Futuwwa, and its membership grew to sixty-three thousand. It was this movement that produced the men who were to stage the pogrom against Baghdad Jews in 1941.

The Arab riots that took place in Palestine between 1936 and 1939 gained wide publicity in Iraq, thanks to efforts made by Palestinian and Syrian exiles and refugees who came to Iraq after participating in them. In October 1939 they were joined by the mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini.

Official discrimination against Jews was introduced in Iraq in 1934, when dozens of Jewish civil servants were dismissed from the ministries of economic affairs and transportation. In 1935 an unofficial 'numerus clausus' (quota) made its appearance in government schools. Jews who wanted to travel to Palestine ran into bureaucratic problems and had to pay a deposit of 50 Dinars, to be held until their return to Iraq; as time went on, the sum of this compulsory deposit grew to 3,000 Dinars. In February 1936, some three hundred Jewish officials - most of them holding senior posts - were dismissed. That same year, when the Arab riots broke out in Palestine, physical assaults on Jews were launched. On the eve of the Jewish New Year in 1936, three Jews were murdered. A few days later, on the Day of Atonement, a bomb was thrown into a Baghdad synagogue, and only by pure luck was a catastrophe averted. Anti-Jewish incitement in the form of demonstrations, newspaper articles, and posters became commonplace. A Jewish-owned newspaper, Al-Hassad, was closed down in 1938. Antisemitic incidents grew in violence and frequency, culminating in the Baghdad pogrom.

German victories in Europe in the early years of World War II raised new hopes among the Iraqi nationalist movement. On April 1, 1941, four colonels (dubbed the "Golden Square"), led by Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, a lawyer by profession and a radical nationalist, seized power in the country and established a pro-Nazi "government of national defense." In the two months that the pro-German government was in power, the Jews lived with fear and terror in their hearts. No blood was shed, but the war against the British, who had reoccupied Iraq to prevent Nazi control, also singled out the Jews as its target, and the presence of Germans was felt in the country. Anti-British and anti-Jewish propaganda was disseminated in the media and at public assemblies. Anti-Jewish demonstrations took place in Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, Irbil, and Amara, often ending in violence. Much money was extorted from the Jewish community, and considerable Jewish property was confiscated to service the needs of the war against the British. Jews were arrested and tortured on charges of spying for the British and giving signals to British aircraft hovering over Baghdad. Police duties and the maintenance of public order were put into the hands of Al-Futuwwa members, organized into armed gangs under the name of Ketaib a-Shabab (Youth Battalions). These battalions were under the authority of the nationalist lawyer and translator of *Mein Kampf* Yunis es-Sebawi, a government minister holding several portfolios, including those of propaganda and internal security, who was pro-Nazi and radically antisemitic. In Baghdad the Ketaib took over two Jewish schools and launched attacks on Jews and violent break-ins to Jewish houses.

The great pogrom and slaughter of Jews in Baghdad and the pillage of Jewish-owned stores in Basra took place after officials of the Rashid Ali regime had fled and before another regime had been installed in its place. Basra was taken by the British on May 16, 1941, but in order to interfere as little as possible with Iraq's internal affairs, the British forces were encamped on the outskirts of the city. This situation was exploited by mobs that on May

19 broke into the commercial quarters to pillage and destroyed Jewish shops and businesses. No loss of life was recorded.

Baghdad was taken by the British on May 30, and here too the British troops stayed out-side the city. That same day Rashid Ali, the Mufti Husseini, and their close associates escaped to Iran. The only member of the pro-Nazi regime to stay behind was Es-Sebawi, who appointed himself military governor. According to some versions, Es-Sebawi planned the organized slaughter of Jews. However, he held power for only a few hours, and was replaced by a Committee of Public Order. The rioting began on the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, June 1, 1941, when Iraqi soldiers, frustrated by their defeat at the hands of the British, encountered a group of Jews in festive attire at the Al-Har bridge; the Jews were on their way to welcome Abdul Illah, the pro British regent, on his return to the capital. The soldiers were joined by a mob, and within a few hours the rioting spread to various other parts of the city. Leading the mobs were the Ketaib a-Shabab, which had been trained by Es-Sebawi. All this happened at a time when actual control was in the hands of the British. The rioting mobs were made up of Muslims from the lower classes, a few Christians who guided the mob to the Jewish houses, and Bedouin from outside the city. The police took no action, and the Committee of Public Order apparently intervened only when it seemed that the riots might spread and endanger non-Jewish property as well. In all, 179 persons were killed in the riots and 2,118 were injured; 242 Jewish children were orphaned. The number of persons whose property was looted was put at 48,584. Unspeakable brutalities were committed in the pogrom: rape, murder, and the crushing of body organs of babies in arms, women and men, young and old. Synagogues were profaned and Torah scrolls defiled.

Once a permanent government was installed, order was restored. On June 8, a commission of inquiry into the events was appointed; its findings called for the punishment of the leaders of the rioting. Pro-Nazi elements were arrested and exiled, and the Jews were even awarded a rehabilitation grant. Nevertheless, the pogroms had created a new situation, as far as the Jews

were concerned. True, the traditional Jewish leadership still believed that the 1941 pogroms had been an exceptional occurrence and that the Jews had to integrate into Iraqi society. The leadership was also influenced by the promise of easy enrichment held out by the economic boom that followed the British victory. It even withheld publication of the inquiry commission's report. The Jewish youth, however, looked for new paths to follow. Most of the young people turned to Zionism, and the first Jewish youth organizations, such as Youth for Rescue, Unity and Progress, and the Society of Free Jews, were founded; in April 1942, a Hagana organization came into being with the help of Jewish emissaries from Palestine. Some of the Jewish youth joined the Communist party, whose prestige had risen, especially after the great victories that the Soviets had scored in the war. Both the Zionist movement and the Communist party operated as underground organizations.

There were more sporadic attacks on Jews in Iraq during the war years, in remote places. On December 17, 1942, eight Jews were murdered in Sandur, in the Kurdish area of Northern Iraq, by Arabs from a neighboring village. The murderers were not punished.