

Book Review

Yoel Moses Reuben, *The Jews of Pakistan: A Forgotten Heritage*

Reviewed by Nathan Katz

Yoel Moses Reuben, *The Jews of Pakistan: A Forgotten Heritage* (Mumbai: Bene Israel Heritage Museum and Genealogical Research Centre, 2010).

This book is a very welcome resource; it expands our knowledge of Jews in Pakistan exponentially, and the author and publisher (Ralph Jhirad) are to be commended for bringing it out.

With no pretensions to being a work of scholarship, Reuben provides us not only with personal narratives, family histories, synagogue and court records, and a plethora of photographs, but also with reproductions of some extremely revealing primary documents.

Perhaps the most interesting is a 1953 report by Israeli Foreign Service officer, Itzhak Ben-Ami, detailing a series of pogroms and anti-Jewish government policies following upon the creation of Pakistan in 1947 and Israel in 1948. At the time the report was written, Karachi's Bene Israel Jewish community was already expiring, having dwindled from 2,500 to 500, most fleeing for security in India. Most poignant is the story of the last religious leader of the community, the chazzan, shochet, and mohel of the Magen Shalom Synagogue for thirty years, returning to safety in his old home in Cochin.

More than any other city, Lahore suffered turmoil in the wake of the partition of British India. Jews there, mostly Persian-speakers from Afghanistan, were caught in the crossfire between Muslims on the one hand, and Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Jews on the other. Their stories are a welcome feature of this book.

Even more Jewishly remote was the community in Peshawar in the North West Frontier Province, the gateway to the Khyber Pass and Afghanistan. According to Reuben, the mullahs of the north west were the most virulently anti-Jewish, an intriguing observation given that region's jihadist tendency today. Especially interesting is a brief note about how British Jewish soldiers stationed there spent their High Holidays in one of Peshawar's two synagogues. Mention is also made of the Bene Israel Jews in Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan province. There is virtually nothing else written about either of these communities, so even this scant information is most welcome.

Pakistani anti-Semitism (or anti-Zionism or anti-Judaism) was not confined to mobs, Reuben contends, but was also official policy. He quotes Prime Minister Z. A. Bhutto's speech at a 1974 Islamic Summit: "To Jews as Jews we bear no malice; to Jews as Zionists, intoxicated with their militarism and reeking with technological arrogance, we refuse to be hospitable." Reuben connects Bhutto's remarks with an edict by President Muhammad Zia al-Huqq in 1988 ordering the destruction of Pakistan's last standing synagogue despite global protests.

Nevertheless, the portrait of Pakistan's Jews that emerges from this work is one of a comfortable Jewish community, well integrated in the economic, military, and social life of British Karachi.

Unfortunately, the book is poorly produced. Some of the chapters and photographs are repeated, and it is all too obvious that a proofreader was not employed. This sloppiness detracts from the work, which nevertheless captures and documents the memory of an expired Jewish community.

The work includes a compact disc about the Karachi synagogue, but the disc jacket in my copy was empty.