

Ruby Daniel — In Memoriam 1912 - 2002

By Barbara C. Johnson

Ruby (Rivka) Daniel — writer, translator, captivating storyteller and treasured elder of the Kochin Jewish community — passed away September 23, 2002, a few months short of her ninetieth birthday. Her book *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*¹ lives on as a rich source of history, legends, memories and songs of Kerala Jewish life. The years of work she devoted to translating and commenting on more than 120 Malayalam Jewish women's folk songs established the essential groundwork for an ongoing international scholarly project to publish, translate and analyze these songs.

Born in December, 1912 (1 Tevet 5673), Ruby Daniel spent the first half of her life in Mattancheri, Cochin, where she pioneered as the first Jewish girl to leave the neighborhood to continue her education, and the first to complete high school and attend college. After working as a government clerk and serving in the Indian Navy, she was among the first in her community to make *aliyah* and join a kibbutz. She was also the first Cochin Jewish woman to write a book.

Ruby Daniel was the eldest child of Eliyahu Hai Daniel (d. 1934) and Leah Japheth Daniel (1892-1982). Her father sold tickets for the ferry boat linking the island of Cochin with the mainland city of Ernakulam — a job that her mother took over after his untimely death. Ruby was profoundly influenced by her maternal grandparents Eliyahu and Rivka ("Docho") Japheth, with whom she and her immediate family lived. Her book is dedicated to the memory of Grandmother Docho, an acknowledged expert in Malayalam Jewish songs. Grandfather Eliyahu Japheth was a *shohet* and a self-educated scholar of Jewish texts who worked as a commercial agent for one wealthy Jewish family and taught Hebrew to the sons of another.

From early childhood, Ruby was an excellent student in the local government school for girls and in the Jewish school where she studied Hebrew, Torah, and the synagogue liturgy each morning and afternoon. Her mother, Leah, insisted on sending her to St. Theresa's Convent School in Ernakulam for higher education, pawning a gold chain to pay the fees. Ruby completed high school there and studied one year at St. Theresa's College, where she acquired the grounding in classical Malayalam which enabled her to translate the women's folk songs so many years later. Unfortunately, she had to leave college to help support the family when her father and grandfather died.

Ruby Daniel never married. Part of an early generation of educated and lower-income working women in Kerala, she was employed in government service, as a

clerk in the High Court, District Court and Munsiff Court, and from 1944-1946 in the Women's Royal Indian Navy. In 1951, she and her sister Rahel left Cochin for Israel, becoming members of Kibbutz Neot Mordechai in the Upper Galilee. Later, she brought her mother and brother to Israel.

It was my privilege to know Ruby Daniel for more than 20 years and to work closely in collaboration with her, in the writing of her book and in the Malayalam songs project. From the time that she first showed me her writings in English — about historical events, legends, ghosts, dreams, and memories of Jewish celebrations in Kerala — I was impressed with her lyrical descriptive style, humor, and outspoken social criticism. She asked for my help in “arranging” a book from what she had written, a task that we accomplished together during my extensive visits to Israel and through the mail. Part of Ruby's motivation in writing her book was to “set the record straight” about a controversy within her own Paradesi community, where the “white” Jews had discriminated in the past against members of her extended family. Believing that they had been unjustly and inaccurately labeled as “*meshuharim*” (freed slaves), she was eager to correct written accounts by scholars and other outsiders who lacked information from her branch of the family. Her forthright accounts of the past have challenged scholars such as myself to reexamine prior assumptions about caste, slavery, and Jewish communities in Kerala.

Another motivation in Daniel's writing was to celebrate the beauty of Kerala and its culture, to “show how good the people of Kerala were, how they welcomed the Jews and treated them well.” Though she did not originally intend to write in detail about her own life, she also came to realize: “It is important for people today to know what happened before they were born, to know about the lives of ordinary women...wildflowers who bloom in the forest. Nobody sees them and they fade” (p. xiv).

In addition, *Ruby of Cochin* includes an account of the author's *aliyah* and life in a predominately Ashkenazi secular kibbutz, where she again met with social discrimination. Maintaining her religious observance and her Indian cuisine and cultural style, she was a diligent and proud participant in the life of Neot Mordechai, working more than 40 years in the kitchen and laundry. Until publication of her book in 1995, Ruby Daniel's talents remained largely unrecognized outside the circle of her family and friends. But that year her kibbutz honored her with a reception, and she was a featured guest and panel participant at the grand opening of the exhibit “The Jews of India” at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. In July 2002, she was awarded a Certificate of Honor from a new organization in Israel, the Cochin Women's Group for Reviving the Malayalam Jewish Songs.

In failing health, Ruby lived her last three years in the nursing facility of her kibbutz, minutes away from her sister Rahel. She was still able to help Rahel and her cousins remember the forgotten tunes of some Malayalam songs, which they

recorded in Jerusalem for a forthcoming CD. Her funeral was attended by family and community members from all over Israel, including a special delegation from the Cochini Women's group.

Ruby Daniel's work will endure as a significant contribution to Jewish and Indian history and ethnography, and as a legacy for the Kerala Jews. She will long be remembered as a woman of strong spirit, intelligence, loyalty, wit, and dignity, who prevailed over economic and social challenges to celebrate and preserve the culture of her community.

NOTES

1. Ruby Daniel, Barbara C. Johnson. *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995, 2002).