

OBITUARY

Shirley Berry Isenberg-In Memoriam 1918-2000

The field of Indian Jewish studies lost one of its pre-eminent scholars in April 2000, when Shirley Berry Isenberg passed away at the age of 82. Shirley's major book, *India's Bene Israel: A Comprehensive Inquiry and Sourcebook*, (Israel: Popular Prakashan and Judah Magnes Museum, 1988), with its unprecedented collection of primary materials, will remain a standard reference work for years to come.

Shirley Berry Isenberg was born in Boston in 1918 and graduated from Radcliff College of Harvard University with a BA in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Her first trip to India and Pakistan in 1949 resulted in an unpublished study entitled "The Boat-People of Sri Nagar, Kashmir; with emphasis on the House-Boat People." She and her husband, Artur, lived and worked in India from 1955 to 1970, spending six years in Madras and nine in New Delhi. While in Madras, she worked as a Research Scholar at Madras University, writing about "Changes in Occupation and Status of Women in South India." She continued her research while in New Delhi, where she also worked for the Educational Resources Center of the State University of New York, developing and writing educational materials relating to India for use in American schools and universities. At the same time, she was a staff member of the American International School in New Delhi, in charge of intercultural relations and enlarging Indian studies as part of the school's curriculum.

During her stay in India, Shirley began her study of the Bene Israel, which she continued even after 1970 when she arrived in Israel, where she and her husband lived until her death. In addition to her major book, cited above, Shirley wrote articles and chapters on the Bene Israel for the *Encyclopedia Judaica Year Book*; Thomas Timberg, ed., *Jews in India*; Orpa Slopak, ed., *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities*; and Nathan Katz, ed., *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*. She also wrote a chapter "The Kaifeng Jews and India's Bene Israel: Different Paths," for Jonathan Goldstein, ed., *The Jews of China*. Additionally, she published in various journals.

An independent scholar, Shirley will be especially remembered for her kindness, generosity and willingness to help other scholars. She gave unstintingly of her time, ideas, materials, and contacts, as well as her warm hospitality to support their research. From the late 1970s until her death, she helped us immensely in our research on Indian Jews in India and in Israel, whether checking details about the Bene Israel, or foraying further afield to help collect the Malayalam-language folksongs from Cochin Jewish women. Shirley's carefully documented recordings and photocopied texts of the latter have contributed greatly to the preservation of this material. She was especially loved by Indian Jews and she valued their friendships. "Other foreign scholars, they call when they want something," a Bene Israel once

remarked, "Shirley, she calls just to say hello and ask how you are."

In the 1970s, she was an advisor to students from the Friends World College and one of the founders of that institution's Israel Center in Jerusalem where she served as co-director and faculty advisor. She was a consultant to the Israel Museum's Department of Ethnology on its Indian exhibitions and a member of the Israel Anthropology Society.

Those who knew Shirley Berry Isenberg will always remember with gratitude her passion for her research, and her love of India and of the Indian Jewish communities there and in Israel. She is survived by Artur, her husband of almost 60 years, and by two of their three children, and is buried on her son's Kibbutz. May her memory be a blessing for them and for all of us.