

DESPERATE PASSAGE TO INDIA

By Ruth Fredman Cernea

For a century, from 1840 until 1942, Burma was a beautiful, hospitable home for a thriving Jewish community.¹ Most were Baghdadis, who came to the region for the commercial promise and religious freedom offered by British rule; in the gentle Buddhist context and lush land of Burma they also found the refuge they sought after years of persecution. Others were Bene Israel or Cochins from India. They remember Burma fondly, as a place of peace and friendship with many other minority populations among whom they lived on the crowded streets of downtown Rangoon or in smaller towns scattered throughout the country: Mandalay, Maymyo, Yenengyaung, Tounghoo, Bassein, Moulmein, Akyab, Pegu. The spiritual and social center for the approximately 2000 Jews² in Burma was the elegant Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue on 26th Street in the heart of Rangoon, close to the Jewish commercial center on Dalhousie Street, just down from the golden Sule Pagoda. Memories of life in Burma are full of images of large family celebrations, Shabbat walks on the jetties, tropical foliage and tropical fruit, and traditional religious life, as well as intracommunity arguments. Above all, for most, it was a lovely, warm, and very happy period.

This "golden age" of Jewish life in the "golden" land that is Burma came to an abrupt end with the advent of World War II. Events occurring thousands of miles away intruded into the comfortable cocoon of daily life for Jews throughout Southeast Asia, whether in Rangoon, Surabaya, Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Calcutta, Bombay, or the many other large and small settlements throughout the region. For many of the communities, it was the beginning of the end of a glorious existence. India, while deeply affected by the war, was never invaded; Burma, including its Jewish community, was devastated.

Like their relatives abroad, the Jews of Burma lived in a British universe, adopting the British world-view, social style, and aspirations while remaining true to Jewish religious tradition. They were in Burma but not "of" Burma: even if born in Burma, they lived in a world alien to their surroundings, among equally "foreign" populations. It is not surprising, then, that along with the physical and emotional upheaval brought by the war, the Jews suffered a shock and an awakening to the reality that had defined their existence for generations. Their escape from Burma during the tragic early months of 1942 is part of, and illustrates, the general cataclysm that enveloped their beloved home, and can only be told in that context.

Even as bombs fell on Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941, life in Rangoon was continuing as usual. The British were, in fact, comforted by America's entry into the war, which certainly would help the Allied position in Europe. But the war in Europe seemed so far away, and they were confident that hostilities would never reach Burma. This "surfeit of optimism,"³ this head-in-the-sand thinking, rested on another disastrously false premise: that the military equipment and training of the 2,000 British troops in Burma were sufficient for the task, should that improbable day ever come.

Burma's struggle for independence from the British in the years prior to the war added another consideration for the frightened foreign populations in Burma. During the 1930s, anticolonial movements had been gaining momentum in Burma as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, with demonstrations, strikes, riots, and dissident organizations. Young Burmese argued that their own economic and social

development was arrested by the control of the British and the pervasive presence of foreign populations in Burma, especially the masses of Indian workers who were competing with them for jobs. Jews, like the Chinese, occupied a different, noncompetitive economic niche, and therefore were not the direct targets of the rioters' wrath. Nevertheless, antiforeign sentiment was nourished by the Japanese, whose businesses, tourists, and scientific surveys throughout Southeast Asia became progressively more suspect as fronts for surveillance and espionage.

In 1940, the Japanese contacted Aung San, the leader of the Burmese opposition, to offer assistance in raising a military force, the Burma Independence Army, that would work with the Japanese in their subsequent invasion of Burma.⁴ Although wary of Japan's own colonialist activities in China, the rebels saw Japan's assistance as the only feasible way to remove the British and took hope in the Japanese slogans, "Asia for the Asiatics" and "We Buddhists." Thus two startlingly different views of the Japanese existed in Burma at the time. While to the British, Indians, Chinese, Jews, and other non-native populations, the Japanese were dangerous aggressors, to the Burmese they were potential liberators. The foundation of security in Burma for the foreign populations rested, therefore, on very soft sand. Such was the British focus of these populations that the reality of the political world around them throughout the 1930s seems not to have penetrated their comfortable life, or was it that the fallibility of the British could not be envisioned?

Comforting illusions no longer sufficed with the bombing and strafing of Rangoon, which began on December 24, 1941, was repeated Christmas Day, and continued throughout the following weeks, until the ultimate fall of Rangoon on March 9, 1942. Rangoon was totally unprepared for the strikes, lacking shelters,⁵ an air defense system, enough fire fighters, or even a warning system. The city's wooden buildings burned easily, explosive bombs demolished stone buildings, the hospital was hit, as were the commercial and residential areas. Casualties were in the thousands.⁶ Chaos reigned; looting was rampant, and gang fights broke out on the waterfront. While the general population panicked, British calm and assurance stayed steady, and Christmas dinners and New Year's celebrations were held as scheduled. Bank holidays were also observed as usual at this time of year—a considerable inconvenience for the terrified people who were trying to withdraw funds to take with them as they fled north or by ship to Calcutta.

British calm and apparent military might fed hopes that the British would stop the Japanese ground advance in the north and south, and that "fortress" Singapore would hold. A systematic evacuation plan was never announced by the British nor was it until February 20 that an announcement was made that civilians should leave Burma.

Even so, the continual bombing and news of Japanese ground advances announced what the British didn't, and starting in December 1941, the panicked population began to flee the city—the Burmese to the countryside, the foreign populations to India. At the time, it was the largest migration in history. By fall 1942, approximately 600,000 people had fled to India by land and sea, some 80,000 dying along the way.⁷ In their panic and haste, they locked the doors of their homes as though going away for a weekend, not knowing that, for most, it would be forever. The docks were scenes of desperation. Boats crowded with British, Americans, Anglo-Indians, Jews, and similar "European" groups—Burmese natives were not allowed—made the 750-mile trip to Calcutta or the alternate 1,000-mile journey to Madras in ships that hugged the coast in darkness amidst bombs and Japanese submarines. The frightened people were allowed to bring only four days of cooked food and 50 lbs of baggage.⁸ Among the precious possessions left behind in Jewish

homes were testimonies of family and community history—photographs, documents, and material objects that connected the panicked refugees of 1941-42 to those other Baghdadi migrants a century earlier. But others, reluctant to leave the only homes they had ever known, and accustomed to seeing the British as powerful militarily, took hope in British confidence that the Japanese successes would not be repeated in Singapore and Rangoon. As Solly Saul, of Albuquerque, recalls, "My father, of blessed memory, who had long been in the employ of British companies, was convinced that the Japanese would never get as far as Burma....My father was not at all anxious to evacuate to India. Nor is he to be blamed for this feeling. It was not easy, to say the least, for people to padlock their apartments, leave their life's possessions behind and set sail for Calcutta. Forthcoming events would prove that evacuating Burma when we could have by sea would have been the right thing to do."⁹

All hope ended with the fall of Singapore on February 15, 1942. The fifty or sixty Jews remaining in Rangoon throughout February took refuge from the continual bombing in the Jewish School, which was some three miles from the center of Rangoon, huddling under improvised shelters made of concrete gutters, and from there they went directly to the boats. Joe Abraham, who was still in Rangoon as a volunteer for Air Raid Precaution, was on the last chartered boat from Calcutta, the *SS Chilka*, along with his eight brothers and sisters, at the end of February 1942. They were among the 3,000 deck passengers crowded aboard the ship, sleeping next to one another, cooking what they could on camp stoves or in galvanized buckets, thankful to be eluding the submarines that were tracking the ships in the Bay of Bengal. For six days instead of the usual three, the *SS Chilka* sailed on, keeping close to the coast and traveling at night in total darkness, until the ship was piloted up the Hooghly River and docked at the Outram Ghat in Calcutta. Boatmen, reaching up from their small vessels offered free food to the hungry, weary passengers—*chapatis*, *kachowrees*, *bhaji*. On the dock, crowds of people searched the faces of the passengers as they disembarked, looking anxiously for a relative, a friend, and pressing fruit, pastry, and other foods into their hands.

Those who stayed behind in Rangoon until the last moment witnessed the conflagration that accompanied the final retreat of the British. As they departed, the British destroyed or set fire to anything that might aid the Japanese: the docks, the telegraph and telephone offices, and especially the oil storage tanks. The scorched earth policy meant that the oil fields in the north also went up in flames.

Over the Taungup Pass

Thousands of refugees escaped to India through the Taungup Pass to Akyab on the Bay of Bengal. Chaos reigned in the city as British officials fled and hospitals were left without staff even as refugees poured into Akyab and other cities on the coast. Between February 9 and March 25, approximately 74,000 people left Akyab for India, but at least 5,000 others died of cholera or exhaustion crossing the high mountain pass. Abraham Shalom Judah, now of Germany, made this trek, first taking a train from Rangoon to Prome. "Our home with all its contents was left standing as it was. All that I took with me were a couple of shirts, an additional pair of trousers, some underwear and a few tins of sardines, cheddar cheese, etc. At Prome I was told that many thousands were fleeing over the Arakan Yomas to India...." Food along the way was a sometime matter: a bit of rice bought from villagers along the route, perhaps some saltfish.

Corpses were littered all along the wayside...I remember on one occasion standing on a peak, and looking at the unending chain of humanity winding its way along the sides of the mountain, and thinking what an epic Cecil B. DeMille could have created from this scene. One just walked and followed those in front of you. No one had a map and no one knew if we were on the right track. Before sunrise it would be bitterly cold and our clothing would be drenched with dew. It was heavenly to feel the warmth of the sun. From Taungup we got a ferry which took us on to Akyab and from there yet another ferry to Chittagong. From there, I traveled by train to Calcutta where I joined my sisters and their children, who had left Rangoon earlier by boat.¹⁰

Mandalay

"If Maymyo was Burma's Shangri-la, then Mandalay was its Hades."¹¹ Even before the fall of Rangoon on March 8, the disheveled second city of Burma became the destination of hundreds of thousands of refugees from the south who were trying to outpace the Japanese in their rapid advance upcountry.¹² Having abandoned hope of escaping by boat to India, they now looked to the airfields near Mandalay as their salvation. In desperation, the refugees convened on the city, traveling by foot, boat and, rarely, by car, and quickly overwhelmed Mandalay's faltering resources. They found themselves in a nightmare of filth and cholera, with diminishing supplies of food and water. There was neither an early warning system nor antiaircraft guns to counter the repeated bombings. Corpses lay in the streets. By January 1942, most of the small Mandalay Jewish community had fled to India; only a very few remained in the futile hope of saving their businesses. Ramah Agasee, now of London, recalls a terrifying time in Mandalay when "the Japanese lobbed incendiaries almost all night in a ring around us. That ring of fire seemed to be closing in on us and we stayed up all night watching it coming closer. In the morning, the authorities blasted a way out and we were all taken by transport to a tiny Burmese village where we camped in a forest opening completely sheltered by trees. We were eventually evacuated by an American volunteer group from Myitkyina (an airfield in the far north) to Assam."¹³

Rescue by plane soon turned into an idle fantasy for most. Airplanes were overwhelmed with wounded as well as by the thousands of people clamoring for space on the precious flights. Once the southern Taungup Pass was blocked by the advancing Japanese, and securing flights became all-but-impossible, the Tamu Pass on the border between Burma and Assam, 400 miles north of Mandalay, seemed the only remaining route to safety.

The Trek

There was no way to anticipate what an arduous month-long trek across the poorly mapped Indo-Burmese frontier would entail, but there appeared to be no other option for those trapped in Mandalay. By the second week in March, thousands prepared to walk through the forbidding terrain. "The overland retreat to India through the jungle-covered mountains of Burma was the longest and most humiliating defeat in the annals of British military history....The screams of starving children, the groans of the sick, wounded and old; the pleas of hundreds of wounded soldiers we had to leave behind on jungle roads haunt me in my dreams," recalls Gurkha Manahadur Rai.¹⁴

Those setting out in March walked through the worst weeks of the trek, during the early monsoon of 1942, exhausted and depleted of energy and resources. Albert Judah of London, who started the trek in March, has given one of the clearest accounts of this terrible journey.¹⁵ As the war approached, he left Bassein, where he

was a clerk in the store of Raphael and Sons, and arrived in Rangoon on February 15 to find the city half deserted, shops locked, and people hastily burying their valuables in the hope that they would retrieve them after a brief stay abroad. As the Japanese army advanced, and the ports closed, the railway was the only way to move north. Along with thousands of other panicked residents of Rangoon, Mr. Judah, his sister Lulu Saul and her children Seemah, Solly, and twins Charlie and Simon, and an elderly aunt, fled to temporary safety with relatives in Mandalay. On March 8, as monsoon season approached, they joined the frightened, sorry procession of British, Anglo-Indian, Chinese, Jewish, and Indian evacuees who trekked by foot, boat, sampan, mule, and elephant, through mud, monsoon, and intense heat, across high mountains and through jungle and swamp. The "route" started by boat or by foot along the Chindwin River, but the river soon grew shallow for boats and everyone had to walk.

Feeding stations were organized by the British, and drinking water was a rare commodity: A British officer, armed with a gun, guarded the tank; the ration was a cup of the highly chlorinated, foul tasting precious liquid a day. Food was a bowl of rice with lentils mixed with chilies and might include small stones, mud, and grit. Health care was nonexistent; the refugees were afflicted by malaria, dysentery, diarrhea, cholera, *kala azar*,¹⁶ and voracious leeches, which incessantly crept into mouths, ears, nostrils, and other body orifices. Some of infirm, sick, or aged were carried in a *dhoolie* (a wooden cart hung from bamboo poles carried by two or four men) or rode on elephants, but everyone else—young and old, pregnant, malarial, feverish—walked six to eight miles each day, starting early in the morning and stopping by noon because of the heat. Camps had been quickly improvised; beds were simply bamboo slats, toilet facilities were usually absent, and washing was possible only if near the river.

After Tamu the way was even more arduous, following footpaths or mule tracks over the steep divide to Palel. Those unable to continue were simply left behind. The roads were lined with dead bodies, including those of the family of Ernest Ezekiel and Hannah Sassoon; the parents and seven children began the journey but only two children survived. Some groups were set upon by bandits. Bitten by mosquitoes and sand flies, stepping on swollen feet, subsisting on little more than rice, lentils, and salt, some 200,000¹⁷ struggled across the Tamu Pass and then on to Imphal and Assam. "Of all the memories of the trek, the most harrowing are of the dead bodies, which were collected every day at the camps and of the dead bodies floating in the Chindwin," recalls Albert Judah.¹⁸ It was four weeks, on April 5, before he and his family reached Palel in Assam, after trekking for five days over the steep mountains. There they were given some medical attention, able to wash with hot water, and served at tables with clean linen. With little more than wormy rice to eat during the last days of the trek, "We fell upon them like savages, like animals," recalls Seemah Saul Betz, now of Denver, "grabbing food, shoving it into our mouths."¹⁹

Alfred Draper describes the scene as the once-proud British troops, and the refugees, struggled to India:

The long columns of troops that writhed along the dusty track like a snake with a broken spine had lost all sense of time. Days and nights merged into one nightmarish blur; one foot followed another, propelled by a burning determination to survive. Bearded, emaciated, wide-eyed with fever and covered with festering sores, they were totally oblivious of the terrain. Many were only kept upright by improvised crutches or bamboo poles and those

fortunate enough to have clothes were infested with lice....But for the fact that so many carried weapons they were barely distinguishable from the thousands of refugees who walked with them.²⁰

At Imphal, the desperate refugees were met by the Burma Refugee Organization set up by the government of Bengal. They were served a cooked breakfast and offered clothing, shoes, and various other items to make them more comfortable before they boarded the train for Calcutta, holding bread and eggs for the journey.

Arrival in Calcutta for many, including Albert Judah, meant immediate transfer to hospitals for treatment of malaria and other illnesses. Seemah Saul Betz spent a year in a Calcutta hospital recovering from typhoid. A Burmese government report (from 1945) estimated that 10,000 people died on the trek.²¹ "Details of the trip have almost faded from my memory, but the names of the towns along the route have not—Kaleva, Tamu, Kohina and Imphal—these names are forever embedded in my memory," recalls Seemah's brother, Solly Saul.²²

Youthful memories are often humorous ones also. Within this terrible time, Albert Judah remembers one thing positive: He tasted elephant's milk ("It's sweet!").²³ And his nephew, Solly Saul, recalls how his twin brothers Simon and Charlie confused those in charge of food, thinking they had already given the precious allotment to the boy before them.²⁴ More sobering is the tale of a Jewish child who fell behind on the trek and was rescued and adopted by a tribal family; reclaimed after the war by a surviving relative, she came with them in great despair, in pain at losing yet another family.

The depth of piety and tradition binding the Jews of Southeast Asia is reflected in the simple statement by exhausted, malarial Albert Judah, who notes, "We reached Calcutta on the 8th of April, 1942, where we could then really observe the religion. The 8th of April happened to be the seventh day of Passover, and that is when I recited my Seder night."²⁵ An even more dramatic expression of the meaning of Jewish tradition to the Baghdadis is in the following recollection, as explained by Mavis Hyman in *Jews of the Raj*:

Azeeza Cohen was the head of a family of eight on the trek, with a baby one month old and two small children...While they were walking in the mountains, less than a week before the journey's end, they 'saw Indian soldiers making *chappatis* and tea, which they very kindly gave to us. However, as it was Passover, my mother refused to eat *chappatis*.' It was very rare to find food on the trek, and when it was available the cost was high. To refuse an offer, when hunger and thirst had been endured for three weeks of trekking was remarkable in itself. But bread had not been part of their diet since they left Mandalay, so it was a special treat. To refuse bread when the aroma was actually rising from the cooking required nothing less than deep faith and an iron will. So great was the faith of the people of this generation, and so important the values they attached to religious beliefs, that even in extremity they did not let their standards fall.²⁶

Solly Saul recalls his amazement on reaching Calcutta to be greeted by his father, whom he had left behind in Mandalay. While Solly and his relatives were struggling across the mountains, an airlift had brought some of those remaining in Mandalay to India. By April 7, 1942, Mandalay was devastated; the railway, the hospital and the Bank of India were in ruins. Some 70,000 refugees remained in the

area, and the governor of Burma sent a plea to the secretary of state for Burma to request American airplanes for an immediate airlift to India for those physically unable to make the long trek or who might be most endangered by the Japanese presence. Flights were organized from Magwe (150 miles southwest of Mandalay) and Shwebo. Abraham Manessah Jacob, who had stayed in Mandalay to guard his small crockery business, was one of the fortunate ones to secure a seat on the plane, arriving in Calcutta on April 17. On March 8, he had sent his wife Sarah and three of their five children ahead of him to safety in India via the overland trek. Sadly, once in Calcutta, he learned that his pregnant wife had died of malaria two days before.²⁷

After heavy bombing by the Japanese, the airfield at Myitkyina was closed on May 6. Refugees unable to get flights but who had reached Myitkyina, "were told they'd have to walk through the Hukong Valley, the hardest part of the route, and weak with hunger and illness, they simply could not. So they sat there and died, unrecorded. A party of Allied troops, going through two years later, found the bodies piled in jeeps and trucks. No one knows who they were. Whether any...Jewish refugees would have been among them, there's no way of knowing," recalls Yoma Ullman, who was part of the evacuation organized by the Burmah Oil Company.²⁸

Calcutta

Approximately 1,500 Jews reached Calcutta; the exact number is elusive, since many were immediately taken in by relatives and never appeared on the roles of the Jewish Refugee Relief Association at 3 Theatre Road. The Jewish refugees were met at the boats from Rangoon and the trains from Assam by members of the Burmese Refugee Committee and by a representative of the Calcutta Baghdadi community, who greeted them as one does with extended family, with food and offers of clothing, cash, and other assistance. Except for this welcoming party, there was no formal assistance from the government or any other organization, and the refugees had to fend for themselves. Despite the obvious hardships of refugee status, the Jews were fortunate, for thousands of other refugees, without the ties of an international family network as existed for the Jews, huddled on the streets of Calcutta, hungry, destitute, disease-ridden.

Notes

¹ The complete history of Jewish residence in Burma prior to World War II is documented in chapters 1 through 5 of my book, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), from which this article is adapted. It is based on extensive archival research in the United Kingdom, Israel, the United States, and Burma, as well as some seventy-five interviews and other personal communications between 1987-2006.

² Roberta Cohen, ed., *The Jewish Communities of the World* (London: World Jewish Congress), 1971), 60.

³ Alfred Draper, *Dawns Like Thunder*, 2.

⁴ Aung San became Minister of Defense in Ba Maw's puppet government (1943-45). Disillusioned with Japanese promises should they win the war, and unhappy about their treatment of the Burmese forces, he switched allegiance to the Allies in March 1945.

⁵ "It was impossible to build underground air-raid shelters in the marshy land on which the city stood." Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies*, 97.

- ⁶ Estimates for the first bombing are 2,750 dead and 1,700 wounded. Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 160. There was one Jewish casualty, Shlomo Solomon.
- ⁷ Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies*, 167.
- ⁸ Mavis Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 159 (Governor General to Secretary of State for India. Deciphered telegram 14:1:42. POL 361. IOR, File L/P&J/8/436. Oriental & India Office Collections [OIOC]. The British Library, London).
- ⁹ Interview, April 1994, and *Sephardi Bulletin* (New South Wales Association of Sephardim), March 1995: 14.
- ¹⁰ Personal communication, letter, August 16, 1993.
- ¹¹ Draper, *Dawns Like Thunder*, 215.
- ¹² In four months, from mid-December 1941 through mid-May 1942, the Japanese advanced 1,000 miles.
- ¹³ Personal correspondence, 1994.
- ¹⁴ Manahadur Rai (M. Gyi), "'Gorkhali ayol' Gurkha Soldiers in the Battle for Imphal, 1944," *Command* 16 (May-June 1992).
- ¹⁵ Interview, July 1993, and Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 159-77.
- ¹⁶ A potentially deadly disease transmitted by sand flies that affects the spleen and distends the abdomen.
- ¹⁷ Estimates of the number of refugees vary widely, from 100,000 to 200,000. Hyman puts the number at 200,000, based on Extracts from Report by the Administrator General on the Evacuation of Refugees from Burma to India (Assam), January-July 1942. Section I. IOR, File L/P&J/8/439 (OIOC). The British Library, London.
- ¹⁸ Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 164.
- ¹⁹ Interview, April 10, 2004.
- ²⁰ Draper, *Dawns Like Thunder*, 252.
- ²¹ *Burma Today*, January 1945, Government of Burma, Simla, as quoted in Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life*, 35. This supports the British estimate, as quoted by Hyman, 162, 245.
- ²² Personal account, October 1994.
- ²³ Interview, July 1993.
- ²⁴ Conversation, September 1994.
- ²⁵ Interview, July 1993. It is a duty of every Jew to take part in a Seder ritual on Passover; Albert Judah means that he recited the *haggadah* and fulfilled the ritual requirements.
- ²⁶ Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 133.
- ²⁷ Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 170.
- ²⁸ Personal correspondence, July 6, 2003.

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