

Jonathan Goldstein, *Jewish Identities in East and Southeast Asia* (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter 2015) pp. xxii-243.

by Marcella Simoni

This volume is a most interesting collection of essays on the history of seven distinct Jewish communities in East and Southeast Asia: Singapore, Manila, Taiwan, Rangoon, Surabaya, Harbin and Shanghai. Hong Kong has not been included here mainly because it remains the “most intensely studied of any modern East Asian Jewish community” (p. ii). The A. adopted a transnational framework for each case, thus expanding on these communities both geographically and chronologically. In the broadest sense, all of them were located “around the China Sea basin” (p. 5), and the timeframe of the A.’s analysis spans from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Some of these histories overlap chronologically, intertwine through the whereabouts of the Baghdadi Diaspora or present some shared traits, but every case is different. The sources of this multi-vocal volume are numerous and varied: archival collections in Europe (Alliance Israelite Universelle in Paris and the Hartley Library in Southampton), Israel (at least Central Zionist Archives, Jabotinsky Institute, Igud Yotzei Sin, Yad Vashem) the US (at least American Joint Distribution Committee, Harvard, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research). Thirty-eight oral history interviews with Jews from all walks of life that have been involved in East and Southeast Asia integrate the written sources and so does a very rich bibliography that also includes unpublished reports, memoirs etc. Considering these first elements, this volume appears precious for the wealth of knowledge it displays, for the published and unpublished bibliography and for the perspectives it opens; at the same time, the idea of studying “East and Southeast Asian Jewish identity in terms of (...) memory, colonialism/imperialism, regional nationalism, socialism and Zionism” is necessarily too broad to offer a coherent picture throughout the volume.

There are some common founding factors that make these different Jewish histories compatible and connected: for instance, their establishment as “seaport cities” and trading centers of the East and Southeast Asian commerce, a situation that David Sorkin and Lois Dubin studied for different contexts (p. 5)<sup>1</sup>; the condition of being expatriates and refugees in different historical moments and to different degrees, that most of the Jews who inhabited these places shared; the memorialization rituals, whether ‘root’ trips, reunions, websites, multilingual periodicals etc. (p. 8; p. 195) that many Jews from East and Southeast Asia have created. Support for the Zionist call represented another unifying factor for these communities, though the times and means of such support differed greatly from place to place: from the proto-Zionist Baghdadi rabbi Yosef Hayyim Ben Elijah (Ben Ish Hai, 1835-1909), to the first Zionist society among Baghdadi Jews, established in Burma in 1903 and in China in

<sup>1</sup> Of the various works by David Sorkin and Lois Dubin on seaport cities, the A. quotes here two. David Sorkin, “Port Jews in three regions of Emancipation” in *Port Jews: Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres 1550-1950*, ed. David Cesarani (London: Frank Cass 2002), 31-46 and Lois Dubin, “Researching Port Jews and Port Jewries: Trieste and Beyond” in *ivi*, 47-58. In the same volume the A. reflects on “The Sorkin and Golab theses and their applicability to South, Southeast and East Asian Port Jewry”, in *ivi*, 179-196.

1904 (p. 25); from the publication of «The Israelight» magazine in Singapore (1934-37) to the foundation of the labor HaShomer HaTzair and HaBonim youth movements in Harbin, Singapore and Shanghai (p. 11); from the spread of Revisionist Zionism in Harbin and the involvement of the Olmert family (p. 113) up to the long history of Zionism in Shanghai and the later establishment of the *Igud Yotzei Sin*, the organization that reunites in Israel today the Jews who have left China, and in part shelters their official memory.

At the same time, the tumultuous political history and changes that invested some of these sites during the twentieth century – Russia and China, just to mention two obvious examples – does not help the coherence of the volume. Indeed the A. remarks how, as in the case of other Jewish historical experiences elsewhere, here too one should use the term Diaspora is its plural form, remembering the multiplicity, variety and diversity of the Jewish historical experience. Such diversity is addressed here for example by emphasizing the diverse political attitudes of the Jews residing in one or the other community: the Bundists of Harbin and the Jewish supporters of Leninism and the Third International in the Philippines and in various Chinese cities in the 1930s; the adherents to the Trotskyist Fourth International in Shanghai and those who supported Mao Zedong's first socialist enclaves in the 1940s. The variety of the Jewish religious experience also remains a sign of their diversity, ranging from the Orthodox Baghdadi historical community of Singapore (p. 17) and Shanghai (p. 137) to that of ultra-Orthodox refugees in Shanghai during World War II (p. 196) from the to the secular and multi-ethnic post-war Jewish community of Manila (p. 76) to the presence of Chabad in Taiwan from the mid 1990s (p. 100). Equally diverse were the various modes of philanthropy and of associationism that East and Southeast Asian Jews adopted.

In a sense, the eight chapters of this volume recall the image of a multi-vocal choir. Chapter one and eight function respectively as introduction and conclusions while chapters two, five, six and seven echo one another, representing the core of this volume. They share broad compatible timeframes (1795- 2015), the Baghdadi identity and provenance of the Jews who inhabited them, the relevance in terms of size of the community throughout this long period, and they all suffered the Japanese occupation. Chapters three and four discuss two other different variants of “multicultural, multiethnic and transnational Jewish identity in East and Southeast Asian soil” (p. 45), i.e. a long-term perspective on the Jewish community of the Philippines, and Manila in particular (ch.3) and the case of Taipei (ch.4).

Chapter two is intended to set the tone of the volume, looking at the Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora, a topic which has been examined extensively. However, while the history of the Baghdadi Jews is usually told through their commercial and philanthropic involvement in Bombay, Calcutta, Shanghai and/or Hong Kong (according to the period under examination), the focus is here on Singapore. As the A. writes, this Jewish community “proved to be the most enduring in terms of its retention of traditional Judaism, the magnitude of its Baghdadi-related Judaic institutions, and the endurance of its pre- and post-World-War II Jewish population” (p. 16). From 1795 to 2015 this history intertwines with that of the opium trade and colonialism, with Zionism, with the question of Jewish refugees during World War II, with the Japanese occupation, with anti-colonial

struggles and, after 1948, with the role played by the Jews in Singapore in helping (and then cultivating) a relationship with the State of Israel. Chapter five delves with the history of the Jews in Harbin, between Russia, China, Japan (and later Israel). The long history of this extraordinary community is well known and, in general, so are the multiple influences that shaped its cultural and political life for Jews and non-Jews alike, as the vast bibliography that the A. quotes shows: a multicultural population composed by at least 120,000 Russians until the mid-1930s, by Chinese (300,000) and Koreans (34,000) and by a tripling Japanese population (15,000 in 1932); the momentous events of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (two world wars, two major local wars, two revolutions involving civil wars); the shifting of at least five political authorities (Czarist Russia until 1917, local warlord Chang Tsolin (Zhang Zuolin) until 1931, the Japanese puppet regime of Manchukuo until 1945, the Red Army until 1946 and the Chinese Communist Party afterwards). As the A. writes, all these conditions caused a “constant inflow and outflow of individuals (...) that created an environment with a wide range of political, economic, and religious thought”. In this conditions “Harbin’s Jewish community flourished” (p. 108). It hosted a minority of Karaites, Orthodox Judaism, and a *maskil* rabbi, a Komsomol youth organization and a Third International communist party in which some Jews were active; it also hosted an important branch of the Zionist Revisionist Betar youth movement, which counted among its most active members the whole Olmert family, and thus the father of future Israeli Likud Prime Minister. A large section of this chapter is indeed devoted to “The Olmert family as a case study of Transnational Identity” (pp.113-128). Chapter six focuses on the long and fascinating history of Shanghai and on how successive waves of Jewish immigration had created by the early 1940s “a microcosm and mosaic of Eurasian-Jewish identities. (...) American Jews and Baghdadis came first, then Russians, and finally Central and Eastern Europeans fleeing Hitler” (p. 137). A large part of this chapter is dedicated to Shanghai as a center of Jewish refuge during World War II, to the cultural activities of central European provenance and to the clandestine political activity that took place there. As the impressive bibliography listed in these pages show, this subject has been investigated from multiple angles and a good synthesis is offered here. Finally, chapter seven takes two different Southeast Asian cities (Rangoon, today Yangon) and Surabaya (Java, Indonesia) to study how “a multicultural, multiethnic and transnational Jewish identity” was formed here (p.177). The histories of Jewish settlement here differ, but both present a very strong connection to respectively British and Dutch colonial expansion, a strong component of Baghdadi Jews, a very early start in Zionist organizations, the Japanese (and Nazi in Surabaya) presence and internment and post-World War Two anti-colonial struggle for independence.

The last two chapters (ch. 3 and 4) appear less well integrated with the others. The former focuses on Manila’s long-term historical engagement with Jews from the first possible arrivals in 1590s as “new Christians”, to the more plausible landings of a small group of Jews trading in diamonds and precious stones after the Franco-Prussian war (1870). When Spain ceded the Philippines to the US after the Spanish-American War (1898), another component of this Jewish community arrived, i.e. the American military personnel. Manila then welcomed Egyptian, Turkish, Syrian Jews on the one hand and Jews fleeing after the Bolshevik revolution on the other. By 1918, Manila had about 150 Jews mainly engaged in trade; unlike the Baghdadis examined above, they did not

follow ethnic networking for their commerce (p. 47). A large part of this chapter is devoted to the question of the Philippine's attitude towards Holocaust refugees, which was an example of selective rather than open Jewish immigration (p. 49) and to the fate of Jews and non-Jews alike during the Japanese occupation (1941-45). Despite their marginality on East and Southeast Asian scene, this chapter closes with a contemporary description of the so-called "Bagel Boys", i.e. a new wealthy class of Jewish American or Israeli males married to women from the Philippines, often living in gated communities with servants, worshipping in each other's homes according to an Ashkenazi *minhag*, thus setting themselves out of the mainstream Sephardic orthodox synagogue of Manila (which follows the tradition from Aleppo), and of its multi-layered though small traditional community. Finally, chapter four focuses on Taiwan, where a Jewish community existed in Taipei since the 1950s to whom this volume is dedicated. Given the complex role of Taiwan in the post-war East and Southeast Asian scenario - from the Korean to the Vietnam wars to the US economic, political and military involvement - the small Jewish community initially consisted mainly of US military personnel, US and Israeli citizens employed by private companies and it then grew to include Israeli dealers in arms and electronics (p. 84). In 1972 it consisted of twenty families which had grown to fifty in 1980 and now maintains an average of thirty. The path of the Jewish community of Taiwan has been one marked by a religious factionalism that has recently come to include a Chabad presence. This chapter is the least historical in the volume, not only for the recent foundation of the Jewish community, but because of the A.'s personal involvement with this community. The personal perspective is often introduced *en lieu* of the documentary source. And while the A.'s testimony can be considered as valid as any other testimony that he himself collected (for example the oral history interviews), this chapter signals a lack of distance from the subject under examination.

Despite this last point, this remains an altogether useful volume that brings together compatible and fascinating histories and opens the way to new avenues of research.

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