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“From Zionism to Self-Rule: Singapore’s Baghdadi Jews”

By Dawei Wang

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*Singapore is an ideal place for trade, the country being peaceful and free from unrest and turmoil, to which China is afflicted. The ups and downs to which merchants are subjected [in China] are totally unknown in Singapore, which is under the benign rule of Great Britain.*¹

-John Solomon, a Jewish merchant visiting Singapore from Shanghai in 1926

Similar to Jazz Age Shanghai during the first half of the 20th c., Singapore was cosmopolitan, economically prosperous, and free of native antisemitism. However unlike Shanghai, which was vulnerable to China’s volatile political and economic situations, Singapore was peaceful, a colonial outpost at the southern edge of British Malaya largely untouched by the turmoil of continental Asia.

The British colonial administration in Singapore offered security to its resident communities, including Baghdadi Jews, who enjoyed the freedom and protection of colonial rule and primarily devoted themselves to commercial activities. That security enabled Baghdadis in Singapore to promote, for a time, the Zionist movement. When that security was threatened during WWII, Baghdadi Jews joined the fight on Britain’s side. Following the war, one particularly active and influential Baghdadi Jew would assume a leading role in negotiating with the British for Singapore’s self-rule.

Singapore’s Baghdadi Jews

Founded in 1819 by Sir Thomas Raffles (1781–1826), Singapore was the first free port in Southeast Asia and the principal center of regional and international maritime trade.² By the time the first Baghdadi Jewish merchant arrived in the 1860s, the island’s society had become highly diverse. Two-thirds of the island’s residents were ethnic Chinese immigrants, while the other third consisted of Malays, Indians, Europeans, Arabs, and other minorities.³ With the opening of the Suez Canal, a growing number of Jews from Europe and the Middle East arrived to seek opportunities on the island. By 1916, the colony had around six hundred Jews,

¹ “The Jews of Singapore: Special Interview with John Solomon,” *IM*, 2 April 1926, p.21.

² Stephen Dobbs, “Singapore” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Maritime History* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

³ “Founding of Modern Singapore,” Ministry of Information, Accessed 4 April 2021,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20090508135636/http://app.www.sg/who/32/Founding-of-Modern-Singapore.aspx>

consisting of both Sephardi and Ashkenazi families.⁴ Its Jewish population reached its height just before World War II, numbering 1,000 out of the total population of 160,000.⁵

The British understood this prized colony's strategic importance and granted its resident population a great degree of freedom. This free and tolerant environment made the territory hospitable for transnational political activities. For decades, Singapore was the nexus of political fundraising for the Chinese diaspora, who bankrolled the Republican Revolution in 1911 that overthrew the Qing dynasty.⁶ The Baghdadi Jews,⁷ acting as ancillaries to the British colonialists as commercial partners, also enjoyed full residential permission, civic inclusion, and commercial privilege from the instant of their arrival.⁸ Antisemitism never became a conscious element in the interactions of the island's different communities.⁹ As in Shanghai, most of Singapore's non-Jews were unfamiliar with Zionism. Those who learned of it, such as the Chinese, generally exhibited empathy for the movement.¹⁰

As in Shanghai, Bombay, and Calcutta, the wealthiest Baghdadi Jews in Singapore played prominent roles in the civic sphere of the colony. According to the colonial government record, at least 25 Jews were selected as potential jurors in 1916 out of a list of 500—an extraordinary number considering that the colony only had six hundred Jewish residents that year. The list includes members from prominent Baghdadi clans such as the Meyer, Elias, Nathan, Adis, Benjamin, and Sassoon families and Ashkenazi clans such as the Frankels.¹¹ Among them, nine were listed as special jurors, who were only called upon to arbitrate high-profile cases. These individuals include Reuben Meyer, son of Manasseh Meyer, community patriarch and president of the Singapore Zionist Society (SZS), and Edward Sassoon Nathan, a leading SZS member and relative of Eze Nathan, historian and editor of the *Israelight* magazine.¹² These men received upper-class English education and belonged to the elite Jewish circle that frequently interacted with the British colonial establishment. They contributed actively to the public works at the colony: the Meyer family, for instance, was a chief benefactor to Raffles College.¹³ It was from this group of wealthy families that the Zionist movement found its leaders.

⁴ Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 62; "Special Interview with John Solomon," *IM*, 2 April 1926, p.21; Cohen, "Jews in Far Off Lands,": During the colonial era, the community consisted mostly of Sephardim, with a sprinkle of Ashkenazim.

⁵ "Letter from AJDC New York to Mr. A. C. Glassgold of Shanghai, Re: Jews in Singapore and the Federation of Malaya," JDC NY AR194554 / 4 / 64 / 1.

⁶ Huang Jianli, "Umbilical Ties: The Framing of the Overseas Chinese as the Mother of the Revolution," *Frontiers of History in China* 6, no. 2 (2011): 183–228.

⁷ For the purpose of this chapter, I adopt the term "Baghdadi" (rather than Babylonian, Iraqi, or Sephardi) when referring to the diaspora of Middle Eastern Jews in colonial Asia. For discussion on the terminology, see S. R. Goldstein, "Baghdadi Jewish Networks in Hashemite Iraq: Jewish Transnationalism in the Age of Nationalism" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2019), 69.

⁸ Jonathan Goldstein, "Across the Indian Ocean: The Trade, Memory, and Transnational Identity of Singapore's Baghdadi Jews, 1795-2013," *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, no. 13 (2013): 98.

⁹ Chan Heng Chee, *A Sensation of Independence: A Political Biography of David Marshall* (Singapore; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 22.

¹⁰ Israel Cohen, *The Journal of a Jewish Traveller* (London: John Lane, 1925), 203-204.

¹¹ Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 63.

¹² *Ibid.*, 62; Eze Nathan later became a community historian and author of *The History of Jews in Singapore: 1830-1945*.

¹³ "SIR M. MEYER DIES AT AGE OF 84," *The Straits Times*, 1 July 1930, p. 13.

Baghdadi Zionism in Singapore, 1920-1937

The roots of Zionism in Singapore can be traced back to the early 1920s when Britain assumed Mandatory control over Palestine. Its history was closely associated with the involvement of one exceptional individual—Manasseh Meyer, the community patriarch and chief benefactor to Jewish institutions on the island colony. Born in Baghdad and educated in Calcutta, Meyer continued his secondary education at St Joseph's Institutions in Singapore. After a stint in Bombay, he returned to Singapore in 1873 to start a prominent career in trading and real estate investment. A pious orthodox Jew, Meyer's strong commitment to the upkeep of Jewish institutions in the Holy Land was animated by the teachings of the esteemed Baghdadi Rabbi Yosef Hayyim Ben Elijah (known as the "Ben Ish Hai").¹⁴ Meyer developed a close personal relationship with the rabbi and had been endowing religious institutions in Palestine since the 1880s.¹⁵ In 1900, he took his wife and seven children to Jerusalem to "inculcate in them a love for Israel."¹⁶

Meyer's interest in political Zionism found its earliest expression in July 1920 after Britain obtained the Palestine mandate. In a letter to N.E.B. Ezra, editor of Shanghai-based Zionist newspaper *Israel's Messenger*, Edward Sassoon Nathan reported that leading members of the Singapore Jewish community had convened a meeting at Meyer's residence, where they decided to answer the call from the Shanghai Zionist Association (SZA) to form a local Zionist branch. Meyer was unanimously elected as president, a position he held until his death in 1930.¹⁷

The first meeting of the Singapore Zionist Society (SZS) also yielded a substantial donation of \$10,000 (S\$USD 88,500 in today's value)¹⁸ to the Jewish National Fund (JNF), of which Meyer contributed half of the total sum (S\$5,000). In addition, Abraham Frankel, a prominent member of the Ashkenazi business community, made a S\$3,000 donation. The rest of the sum came from Joseph Levy (vice president), Isaac Meyer (honorary treasurer and son of Manasseh Meyer), Charles Ginsburg (honorary secretary, 1922-1928), and Edward Nathan.¹⁹ These founding members formed the core leadership of the SZS during its most active period (1920-1930, until Meyer's death).

In the following months, the Society doubled its effort and raised an additional S\$8,690.²⁰ In the meantime, Manasseh Meyer hosted the family of Rabbi W. Hirsch, the freshly appointed rabbi of Shanghai's Ohel Rachel Synagogue who, on the way to Shanghai, stopped over in Singapore where he delivered an "intensely interesting address to the SZS members on Zionism."²¹ Meyer opened the SZS membership to all and offered to host all meetings at his

¹⁴ Goldstein "Across the Indian Ocean," 105; David Solomon Sassoon, *A History of the Jews in Baghdad* (Letchworth: S.D. Sassoon, 1949), 149.

¹⁵ Ibid., Figure 5 as quoted in 104: The Ben Ish Hai composed a special dedication for the opening of Singapore's Chesed El synagogue, which Meyer built in 1905; Cohen, *The Journal*, 200: Meyer maintained a house for Talmudic study (*Beth Ha-midrash*) and a synagogue for Baghdadi Jews in Jerusalem.

¹⁶ Goldstein "Across the Indian Ocean," 103-105.

¹⁷ "Singapore Jewish Community Vies with Shanghai in Raising Large Sums," *IM*, 16 July 1920, p. 7.

¹⁸ Hereafter in this chapter, the dollar sign "\$\$" indicates "straits dollar," the currency of the Straits Settlements from 1898 until 1939. In the 1920s, the monetary value of one strait dollar roughly equated to one eighth of one British pound sterling, which was also widely circulated in Singapore.

¹⁹ "Large Sums Raised in Singapore," *IM*, 16 July 1920, p. 8.

²⁰ *IM*, 29 October 1920, p. 17.

²¹ *IM*, 17 December 1920, p. 45.

mansion “Jeshurun”.²² Under his insistence, Singapore became the first Jewish community in the East to establish an annual subscription to Keren Hayesod.²³

1921: Israel Cohen’s visit to Singapore

In 1921, the SZS received its first envoy from the Zionist authorities. Israel Cohen (1879-1961), a British Jew and general secretary of the Zionist Organization, arrived at the island colony on February 19th, having completed two successful fundraising stops in Hong Kong and Shanghai. These visits were part of Cohen’s year-long tour in Asia’s Jewish communities, where he aimed to spread awareness for Britain’s Balfour Declaration and gather “material support for its practical realization.”^{24,25}

Like Rabbi Hirsch, Cohen received warm hospitality from Manasseh Meyer for the duration of his stay. He was given a room at Meyer’s mansion “Belle Vue” on Oxley Rise, and his time there left a warm impression:

Sprawling over the summit of a grassy slope was a large white palatial residence, from which extended ample wings...Mr. Meyer, wearing a black skullcap and seated in an armchair with a book of Hebrew lore on a little table before him, awaited me on the covered porch that led to the house’s main entrance. He gave me a cordial greeting and asked after the peace of *Erez Israel*.²⁶

Cohen was surprised that the renowned patriarch, who was “reputed to be the richest Jew in the whole of the Far East,” was such a pious and self-effacing presence. The two exchanged news from the Land of Israel, which Meyer knew much about due to his frequent visits to the Holy Land. Holding a keen interest in the development of the *Yishuv*, the patriarch also brought up the alleged mistreatment of the Sephardim of Safed and Jerusalem at the hands of local Ashkenazim, a charge that the envoy dismissed. On his way to the synagogue the following day Cohen learned that Meyer, an active member of the community, even gave out rickshaw allowances to ensure a complete congregation at every Sabbath service at the Chesed El Synagogue, which he funded.²⁷

The next day, Meyer invited the island’s entire adult Jewish population to a lavish reception at his residence for Cohen’s appearance. The speech was held in a “very large drawing room” with a Zionist flag “hung conspicuously over a stupendous gilt-framed mirror.” Around 250 people attended the Zionist envoy’s speech and gave “vigorous applause” to his fundraising

²² Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 31, 33: To become a SZS member, one only needed to contribute S\$25 a year (with additional optional contributions ranging from S\$10 - S\$400). The SZS meetings took place at Meyer’s mansion on the seafront of Katong.”

²³ *IM*, 7 March 1930, p. 8.

²⁴ Cohen, *The Journal*, vii.

²⁵ Israel Cohen was a British Jew born in Manchester and served as secretary of the Zionist Organization from 1922. He made a historic fundraising tour of Asia’s Jewish communities (including Shanghai and Singapore) that lasted one year from 1920 to 1921 and raised over £116,000 (~USD 9 million in today’s value). He was the author of *The Journal of A Jewish Traveler*, one of the few first-hand accounts on Jewish communities in Asia under British colonial rule.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 199-200.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 200-201.

plea.²⁸ Upon concluding his remarks, Cohen looked to Meyer to lead off the first donation. To his delight, the patriarch wrote a £3,000 (~USD 212,000 in today's value) check on the spot.²⁹

Meyer's £3,000 donation was the largest single donation that Cohen received during his Asia tour up until then. His authority and strong appeal among the Jewish community helped raise another £2,000 for the JNF during the remainder of Cohen's stay in Singapore.³⁰ According to Cohen, the sum of £5,000 represented a high average for the small community. It is fair to suggest that Meyer's hospitality, leadership, and generosity in contributing to the Zionist cause constituted an indispensable part of the success of Cohen's mission in Singapore.

1922: Einstein Arrives

*"Arrived in Singapore, through narrow passages between small green islands, there we were met and warmly greeted by Zionists."*³¹

-Albert Einstein

Eleven months after Cohen's visit, Albert Einstein arrived in Singapore for another fundraising mission. The renowned physicist and his wife Elsa came to the island colony on November 2nd, 1922, on their way to a lecture tour in Japan. The couple came for a specific purpose: to urge the wealthiest members of Singapore's Jewish community to donate to the nascent Hebrew University at Jerusalem. The meeting was pre-arranged by Chaim Weizmann, president of the Zionist Organization, who cabled Manasseh Meyer and asked the community leader to arrange a reception.³²

All leading members of the Zionist Society greeted the Einsteins upon their arrival, along with the island's entire Jewish community. This time, the Society decided to host the visitors at the residence of the Montors, a German Jewish family prominent in the local jewellery business.³³ The Montors also acted as Einstein's translator, facilitating the couple's social engagement during their stay. In addition, Meyer's daughter, Mozelle Nissim, who made "a most charming and able hostess," arranged a 300-guest reception at Meyer's mansion "laden with refreshment" while a chamber orchestra gave a performance.³⁴

The general attitude of the local Jewish population towards the Einsteins was a sense of awe and respect, which contributed to their enthusiasm for answering his fundraising plea. As Alfred Montor said during his opening address at the banquet:

We [The Singapore Jewish community] deem it a high honor to receive you, not only as a son of our ancient race but as one whose mind has soared beyond the range hitherto

²⁸ Ibid., 202; Cohen mostly described true to fact when it comes to audience reaction. For example, he did not attempt to hide his frustration when he saw low turnout to his speeches at Bombay and Calcutta. See Israel Cohen, "Jews in Far Off Lands," *Jewish Chronicle*, 3 June 1921.

²⁹ Cohen, *A Journal*, 202-03.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Albert Einstein and Ze'ev Rosenkranz, *The Travel Diaries of Albert Einstein: The Far East, Palestine, and Spain, 1922-1923* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 111.

³² *IM*, 1 December 1922, p. 14.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., "Singapore Jewry Give Memorable Reception to Dr. and Mrs. Albert Einstein," p. 17; *The Straits Times*, 31 October, 3 November 1922: The reception took place at 5 p.m. at Meyer's mansion. Attendees included leading members of the Jewish community and the Anglican bishop of Singapore.

marking the limits of human attainment...we understand that the expeditious completion of the Jerusalem University is a matter very near your heart...and we pledge ourselves to raise funds to assist in the noble work.³⁵

Einstein was touched by the enthusiasm of the Jewish community and the grand reception given to him by the leading community members. In his own words, he was “eagerly surprised to find here [Singapore] in the Far East such a happy unity among our brethren.”³⁶ His fundraising plea was duly responded to by the host Manasseh Meyer, who led the contributions with a £500 check to the Hebrew University, followed by another £250 from the rest of the community.³⁷

1923-1930: The Momentum Continues

Under the leadership of Manasseh Meyer, the SZS maintained strong momentum in the years following Cohen and Einstein’s visits. In 1923, the SZS hosted Caroline Greenfield, representative of Hadassah,³⁸ whose stay yielded S\$3400 of donations from 36 members.³⁹

In 1924, the SZS welcomed Dr. Ariel Bension, the remarkable Jerusalem-born scholar, poet, multi-linguist and envoy from Keren HaYesod whose speech, delivered in Arabic, “created a very favorable impression on the Sephardi [Baghdadi] community” and secured S\$6433 of contributions.⁴⁰ From 1924-25, the SZS remitted an additional £2175 to the Zionist funds, adding to a total sum of more than £10,000 raised since 1920 (~USD 964,000 in today’s value).⁴¹ By the end of 1925, its membership had reached 59. *Israel’s Messenger* remarked that the SZS was “led by an ideal president” and was “in a healthy condition, having made “great progress in [contributing to] Keren Hayesod.”⁴²

On a trip to Singapore in 1926, the Shanghai businessman John Solomon remarked that Meyer’s residence was a “beehive of activity for the [Zionist] cause.” He observed that Singapore was “a strong center for Zionistic work, thanks to such energetic workers as Mr. Meyer and Mr. Ginsburg, J. Levy, I. Meyer, and others.”⁴³ Indeed, the leadership of the notables continued to be a key feature in SZS fundraising during this period. Of all donations, Meyer’s contributions often constituted a third or half of the total sum. The rest came from several prominent SZS leaders, all members of the wealthiest Jewish families, such as the Clumeck, Elias, Nathan, Ginsburg, Levy, Montor, and Frankel families.

³⁵ *IM*, 1 December 1922, p. 17-18; Montor’s speech was also reprinted in local press. See *The Straits Times*, 3 November 1922.

³⁶ *IM*, 1 December 1922, p. 18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Hadassah (Women’s Zionist Organization of America), is an American Jewish volunteer women’s organization, founded in 1912 by Henrietta Szold. See <https://www.hadassah.org/about/history>.

³⁹ *IM*, 9 February 1923, p. 19.

⁴⁰ *IM*, 11 April 1924, p. 17; 6 September 1924, p. 14.

⁴¹ *IM*, 6 September 1924, p. 14; 6 November 1925, p. 13: The SZS forwarded £1355 in 1924 and £820 in 1925 to the Zionist headquarters, the majority of which went to KH and JNF.

⁴² *Ibid.* The quotes are drawn from comments made in *Israel’s Messenger* on the SZS annual report of 1924 and 1925, respectively, both of which were published in the paper. According to the 1924 annual report, Manasseh Meyer also served as president of Keren Hayesod’s Singapore branch.

⁴³ “Jews of Singapore: Special Interview with John Solomon” *IM*, 2 April, 1926, p. 2.

From 1926-28, the SZS raised another £2422 for KH and JNF.⁴⁴ With the aging Manasseh Meyer gradually retreating from public life, his daughter Mozelle Nissim began to play a higher profile role in the SZS leadership. *Israel's Messenger* attributed much of the SZS's momentum to her, whom the paper described as "the heart and soul of the movement in Singapore."⁴⁵ Aside from fundraising, other initiatives such as launching a Zionist magazine also appeared on the SZS agenda during this period.⁴⁶

In March 1929, Singapore's Jewish community celebrated the ailing patriarch Manasseh Meyer for his newly conferred knighthood by King George V for his "public service and benevolence" to the colony of Singapore.⁴⁷ *Israel's Messenger* called him "a pillar of traditional Judaism and Jewish nationalism." Meyer's reputation had gathered wide fame such that foreign press, including *Reuters*, carried the news of his decoration.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, the SZS continued to maintain strong momentum under the leadership of his daughter Mozelle. In April 1929, Dr. Bension, the well-beloved envoy from KH, made his last visit to Singapore before the passing of the patriarch. Bension's visit generated strong interest across all sections of the Singapore Jewish community, who reciprocated his visit with a substantial £5,000 donation to the KH.⁴⁹ Like his father, Mozelle Nissim led the fundraisers by contributing £3,000 to establish a secular school at the village of Kfar Vitkin near the Plain of Sharon, the northernmost Jewish settlement in Mandate Palestine.⁵⁰ The rest of the contributions mainly came from two of Mozelle's friends, the wives of SZS leaders D. J. Elias and Victor Clumeck, and small sums from the broader Jewish community.⁵¹ In December 1929, Mozelle organized a successful fundraising event for the local branch of the Women's International Zionist Organization, of which she was president.⁵²

However, after 1929, the SZS had all but ceased its strong fundraising momentum. The reversal of Britain's Palestine policies in 1930 created a deep schism within the Zionist movement, shaking the commitment of the wealthy members of the Singapore Jewry and other anglophile upper-class Jews in the British Empire.⁵³ Moreover, the publication of the White Paper in 1930 also coincided with the death of Manasseh Meyer, who had been the pillar of Zionist fundraising in the island colony. This reality further eroded the cohesion within the SZS and the commitment of the greater Jewish community to the Zionist cause.

⁴⁴ *IM*, 6 May 1927, p. 4; 8 July 1927, p. 10; 6 January 1928, p. 21: The SZS raised £800 in 1926, £500 in January 1927, and £1,122 throughout the rest of 1927.

⁴⁵ *IM*, 6 January 1928, p. 21.

⁴⁶ *IM*, 2 March 1928, p. 9: Ellis M. Bassous, a publicist and businessman, had the initiative to start a Jewish monthly *The Jewish Standard*, devoted to "the interests of Jews, Judaism, Zionism in Straits Settlements." However, the initiative did not gather enough support or attention and never came into fruition.

⁴⁷ "MALAYA'S NEW KNIGHT," *The Straits Times*, 1 March 1929, p. 11.

⁴⁸ *IM*, 5 April 1929, p. 54.

⁴⁹ *IM*, 3 May 1929, p. 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, J. Goldstein, *Across the Indian Ocean*, 107; J. Goldstein, *Jewish Identities in East and Southeast Asia: Singapore, Manila, Taipei, Harbin, Shanghai, Rangoon, and Surabaya* (Berlin, Germany; Boston, Massachusetts: De Gruyter Oldenbourg), 2015.

⁵¹ *IM*, 15 May 1929, p. 2.

⁵² The WIZO was founded in London in 1920 by Rebecca Sieff, Vera Weizmann (wife of Chaim Weizmann), Edith Eder, Romana Goodman, and Henrietta Irwell to provide community services for the residents of Mandate Palestine.

⁵³ See "The Passfield White Paper"; As discussed in Chapter Two, many wealthy donors hitherto generous to the Zionist cause in the Shanghai Baghdadi community, such as Sir Victor Sassoon, retracted their support after they saw that the movement's objectives no longer aligned with British policies.

After 1930, the SZS slowed down its fundraising effort like its counterpart in Shanghai. However, unlike Shanghai, which witnessed the emergence of a plethora of revisionist Zionist organizations founded by Russian and East European Jews, Singapore saw no immediate succession of this kind. It would wait until 1934 when the next wave of political activism emerged from its Jewish community.

David Saul Marshall and *Israelight* magazine

Born in 1908 into an upper-middle class Baghdadi Jewish family, David Saul Marshall grew up to become a prominent criminal lawyer, political activist, and Chief Minister of Singapore's first elected government.

David's mother Flora was educated in Baghdad at an elite French-style school sponsored by the Alliance Israelite Universelle. His father Saul also came from Baghdad and ran a successful trading business in Singapore.⁵⁴ Like many Singaporean elites of his time, Marshall completed his secondary education at the prestigious Raffles Institutions, after which he earned a law degree from the University of London and was admitted to the Middle Temple and called to the Bar in 1937.⁵⁵ Before embarking on his illustrious political career, Marshall was a well-known youth activist with a reputation of being a "young firebrand" at Raffles and held "an idealistic attitude" towards his Jewish heritage."⁵⁶ He enjoyed a close friendship with Mozelle Nissim, teaching French to Jewish children at her home and donating to her Jewish Women's League charity fund. When Mozelle stayed in Calcutta during the Japanese occupation, Marshall took over the community leadership and oversaw the Jewish Welfare Board.⁵⁷

From 1934 to 1937, Marshall was the founding and managing editor of the English-language *Israelight* magazine, the first periodic publication of Singapore's Jewish community.⁵⁸ Most of the editorial team consisted of Marshall's friends at Raffles, who were a group of Jewish youth from the island's well-off Baghdadi families. They include Marshall's brother George, three Sassoon siblings, two Nathan brothers (including the historian Eze Nathan), and members of the Adis, Ezekiel, and Gubbay families.⁵⁹

All these young people were educated at elite British schools and saw the success of their Jewish community as symbolic of Singapore's cosmopolitan spirit. As they wrote in the editorial of the magazine's first issue: "our community is drawn from every part of the world...we should be able to build on these cultures."⁶⁰ The founders of *Israelight* aimed to "work for unity and self-respect for the local Jewish community" and bring about "a revival of all that is fine in the traditions of the Jewish race and of 'Israel' that has for centuries been the 'light' of the whole world." Like their forefathers in the Baghdadi diaspora, they took pride in

⁵⁴ Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 35.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 81; Chapter Two "Growing Up" in Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1998); Tien Mui Mun, "S. Rajaratnam," Singapore Infopedia, n.d. Accessed May 2, 2021: Lee Kuan Yew and S. Rajaratnam, two of Singapore's founders and Marshall's colleagues, were both educated at Raffles and obtained law degrees in Britain before embarking on political careers. Lee became the long-term prime minister of independent Singapore. Rajaratnam co-founded the People's Action Party (PAP) and served in an array of cabinet positions.

⁵⁶ Nathan, *The History of Jews in Singapore*, 81.

⁵⁷ Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 88, 111.

⁵⁸ Nathan, *The History of Jews in Singapore*, 81-82.

⁵⁹ Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 86-88.

⁶⁰ Nathan, *The History of Jews in Singapore*, 81-82.

their Jewish heritage and saw the Jewish faith not as a hindrance but as an essential element to the formation of their identity.⁶¹

Unlike *Israel's Messenger*, the editorial content of Marshall's *Israelight* was not pro-Zionist but relatively sympathetic to the movement. It presented to Singapore's Jewish community the serious issues pertaining to world Jewry, especially concerning the political development in Palestine. For instance, *Israelight* reprinted the Royal Commission Report on Palestine, which detailed the complex and intractable situation in the Holy Land and recommended moderating the original terms of the Mandate, and various articles from other Zionist newspapers.⁶²

The magazine was well-circulated in elite Jewish circles in Asia and received numerous responses from beyond the Singapore community. J. E. Salmon, honorary secretary of the Shanghai Jewish Communal Association, commended in a letter to N.E.B. Ezra that the magazine showed "much talent among our young people."⁶³ In a letter to Ezra, the Iraqi Consul of Bombay informed him that *Israelight* was among the Jewish periodicals temporarily banned in Iraq. The list also includes Shanghai's *Israel's Messenger* and Bombay's *Jewish Tribune* of Bombay, the two most authoritative Jewish newspapers in the East. This incident shows that the magazine's wide readership not only remained within Jewish communities in Asia but also extended to Iraq, where its appeal was strong enough to warrant the attention of the Iraqi authorities.⁶⁴

In 1937, Marshall left the editorship at *Israelight* and embarked on his legal career. Other young members of the magazine's editorial team followed suit and assumed responsibilities in various parts of Singapore's civic life, which led to the end of the magazine's publication. In 1942, the Japanese invasion of Singapore dispersed most of the island's Jewish inhabitants. Some of the wealthy Baghdadi families escaped to the United States and India, while Marshall stayed and was briefly interned at Japanese camps as an enemy national. Throughout the occupation, Marshall led the Jewish Welfare Board in providing food and shelter for the internally displaced Jewish families in Singapore and resettling the Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe.⁶⁵ Deprived of funding, human resources, and organized structure, the Zionist movement receded and disappeared from the center stage of Jewish political life in Singapore.

Baghdadi Zionism in Singapore: Distinctive Features

What were some the features of the Zionist movement in Singapore?

Singapore Jewry should be viewed in its larger geographical-cultural context. The expansive Baghdadi Jewish diaspora that links Bombay to Shanghai exhibited strong interconnectivity. As Silliman observes, the Eastern Baghdadis had a strong sense of unity and viewed themselves

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 88.

⁶³ *IM*, 2 September 1934, p. 19.

⁶⁴ *IM*, 1 June 1935, p. 16; *IM*, 2 August 1935, p. 10: The magazine was later allowed to enter the country, while *Israel's Messenger* and *Jewish Tribune* remained banned; S. R. Goldstein, "Baghdadi Jewish Networks, 187-88: Foreign Jewish and non-Jewish periodicals enjoyed wide readership within the Iraqi Jewish communities during this period. The censorship of foreign press, which followed the banning of Zionism as an official ideology, occurred against the backdrop of growing unrest and anti-Jewish sentiment in the country after the end of the British Mandate and the death of King Faisal.

⁶⁵ Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 111.

as a single community that transcended national boundaries wherever they settled in Asia.⁶⁶ For Shanghai and Singapore, the two largest Jewish communities in East Asia, this interconnectivity fostered robust interactions between their respective Zionist organizations—the Shanghai Zionist Association (SZA) and the Singapore Zionist Society (SZS).

Members of the SZS and SZA maintained frequent contact through English-language Jewish periodicals such as *Israel's Messenger*, which were well-circulated in the Eastern settlements. For instance, Julian Frankel, son of Abraham and Rosa Frankel of Singapore, was an avid reader of Shanghai-based *Israel's Messenger*. In his own words, the newspaper had brought him “a stimulant in all things Jewish” and made him “feel happy of the prospects awaiting” the Jewish community.⁶⁷ He also engaged in public discourse on Jewish affairs by writing letters to the editor.⁶⁸ Likewise, former SZS secretary Edward Nathan regularly reported to the SZA on Zionist activities in Singapore. He was also an active reader of *Israel's Messenger* and commended the paper for “its splendid work in promoting Zionism in the Far East.”⁶⁹ The SZS also published its annual reports on the paper, which frequently led its editor to urge the Shanghai community to emulate the fundraising effort in Singapore.⁷⁰

Parallel to the situation in Shanghai, the Zionist movement in Singapore was primarily a preoccupation of the wealthy Jews. The Zionist authorities in London and Jerusalem designated their mission in Singapore as primarily fundraising and not as manpower recruitment. Their main target was the wealthiest Jews such as Manasseh Meyer, and they adjusted their message accordingly to achieve this end. This priority effectively excluded most of the island’s Jewish population from their consideration.

However, this doesn’t mean that all donations came from the upper class. Meyer made a conscious effort to widen the Zionist appeal outside the elite circle. He invited all community members to attend major SZS gatherings, especially the grand receptions for visiting envoys such as Israel Cohen, Ariel Bension, and Albert Einstein. There, less wealthy Jews did their part by placing donations in the JNF donation boxes placed at their door by the SZS members.⁷¹

Similar to their strategies in Shanghai, the Zionist authorities concentrated on Singapore’s wealthiest Jews. During Einstein’s visit, for instance, he only met the leading members of Jewish society in person. A picture taken at his reception shows the scientist sitting alongside a dozen individuals: Manasseh Meyer and his daughter Mozelle and son Reuben, Joseph Levy, the Elias brothers, the Clumecks, Abraham Frankel, Charles Ginsburg, S. R. Sassoon, and Israel Cohen.⁷² Except for Cohen, who was called to Singapore to accompany the Einsteins as Weizmann’s liaison officer, all were leading members of the SZS and Singapore’s Jewish community.⁷³ *Israel's Messenger* also reported that Mozelle hosted a private, 40-guest banquet

⁶⁶ Jael Miriam Silliman, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames : Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2001), 2–10.

⁶⁷ *IM*, 11 April 1924, p. 22.

⁶⁸ *IM*, 5 August 1927, p. 19.

⁶⁹ *IM*, 5 April 1929, p. 21.

⁷⁰ “Singapore Jewish Community Vies with Shanghai in Raising Large Sums,” *IM*, 16 July 1920, p. 8; *IM*, 6 September 1924, p. 14; *IM*, 3 May 1929, p. 6: “Singapore has taken a fine lead and we hope her example will be emulated in Shanghai.”

⁷¹ *IM*, 6 September 1924, p. 14: The JNF boxes collected over S\$1595 in 1924, accounting for one eighth of the regular donations remitted to the JNF that year. *Israel's Messenger* remarked that the SZS’s performance in gathering small individual donations should “wake up” Shanghai” in this matter.

⁷² *IM*, 1 December 1922, p. 18.

⁷³ Although not all prominent Jewish families were present in the SZS leadership. See the following section.

for the scientist couple after the general reception, an exclusive event presumably reserved for guests with the most fundraising potential.⁷⁴

Other indications of Zionism as an upper-class preoccupation of Singapore Jewry include the fundraising event of Mozelle Nissim for the Women's International Zionist Organization. The fundraiser, held at Mozelle's mansion, featured themed performances of Japanese Fete dance and an elaborate tea ceremony. All attendees were Mozelle's female friends, such as the spouses of leading SZS members. Less affluent women from the *mahallah* were unlikely to be acquainted with these cosmopolitan elements or receive invitations.⁷⁵ These fundraisers were also exclusively conducted in English, the *lingua franca* of those who had received a British education. John Solomon, visiting Singapore in 1926, observed that English was unintelligible to most of the Arabic-speaking Baghdadis.⁷⁶

Marshall's English-language *Israelight* magazine was similar. The magazine mainly reached upper-class households.⁷⁷ Its editorial team consisted exclusively of children of affluent Baghdadi families educated at British schools, and even Marshall, whose family did not count among the wealthiest in the colony, belonged to the same social circle by virtue of his elite education. Bieder observes that while *Israelight* did bring people together, its readers were primarily people of the same socioeconomic class with lifestyles resembling those of the British colonial elites rather than their co-religionists in the *mahallah*, who conducted daily life in their separate social sphere imbued with culture, language, and lifestyles of Iraq.⁷⁸

The development of Zionism in Singapore's Baghdadi Jewish community was pushed ahead by a few enthusiastic individuals. The majority sympathized with the upkeep of Jewish institutions in Palestine but remained averse, apprehensive, and sometimes critical of the Zionist authorities.

Manasseh Meyer and his daughter Mozelle Nissim exhibited a strong personal commitment to the Jewish community in the Holy Land long before Herzl established the Zionist Organization. The Meyer family was the "mainstay of all communal institutions" and the indispensable leaders in Singapore Zionism. Their contributions often accounted for over half of the SZS annual remittances to JNF and KH. Their family residence was the "beehive" of Zionist activities, and Mozelle was a hostess at all receptions for Zionist envoys and notable Jews visiting Singapore.⁷⁹ Mozelle was also the founder and president of the local chapter of the Women's International Zionist Organization. She was accredited as an "ardent co-worker and a great enthusiast for [Meyer's] Zionist undertaking" and the "heart and soul of the movement in Singapore."⁸⁰

The Meyers' strong enthusiasm and commitment were the keys to the success of Zionist fundraising in Singapore. Ida Bension, the wife of Ariel Benson, wrote that Meyer not only made substantial subscriptions to all Zionist funds but also used his authority and influence to

⁷⁴ *IM*, 1 December 1922, p. 18.

⁷⁵ *IM*, 6 December 1929, p. 29.

⁷⁶ "Special Interview with John Solomon," *IM*, 2 April 1926, p. 21.

⁷⁷ Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 86.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁷⁹ "Special Interview with John Solomon," *IM*, 2 April 1926, p. 21.

⁸⁰ Ida Bension, "Jewry's Grand Old Man of the Far East," *IM*, 7 March 1930, p. 8; 6 January 1928, p. 21.

sway “his rather indifferent fellow citizens” in the community, who “allowed most of the burden of communal work to be shouldered by these two, father and daughter.”⁸¹

Aside from the Meyers, few of Singapore’s Baghdadi elites showed consistent interest in supporting Zionism. Of the nine SZS members who made three-figure donations to the Caroline Greenfield mission in 1923, Edward Nathan was the only person outside the Meyer family. Most prominent Baghdadi families, such as the Isaacs, the Sayers, the Benjamins, the Ezeiels, the Adises, and the Gubbays, made sporadic donations to the Zionist funds but were absent from the SZS core leadership.⁸²

The lack of consistent support for Zionism among the Baghdadi upper class did not stem from general financial concerns. Singapore’s economy thrived in the 1920s, and the island’s financial system was not marred by currency appreciation or volatile political situation as in Shanghai. Baghdadi families such as the Adises steadily grew their real estate holdings throughout the 1920s and acquired some of the largest portfolios on the island by the end of the decade.⁸³

Some wealthy Baghdadis were indifferent to the Zionist plea because they were critical of its authorities in Jerusalem. During Alexander Goldstein’s fundraising tour in 1927, Eze Nathan took the envoy to visit the mansion of Abdullah Shooker, a successful Baghdadi businessman and former partner at Manasseh Meyer’s conglomerate. They expected a generous sum from Shooker, whose wife had endowed an array of educational institutions in Baghdad and Palestine.⁸⁴ However, Shooker coldly refused the plea of his guests, citing a report he had received on the alleged mistreatment of Sephardi immigrants in the *Yishuv* by their Ashkenazi superiors.⁸⁵

However, many did show sympathy for the movement on certain occasions. It helped if Zionist emissaries knew how to speak Arabic. For instance, when Ariel Bension visited Singapore in 1924, Charles Ginsburg reported:

Dr. Bension, the envoy from Keren Hayesod has arrived and was warmly received by members of our community... Dr. Bension addressed the meeting in Arabic and his speech created a very favorable impression on the Sephardi [Baghdadi] community who have not had a previous opportunity of having the Zionist movement so clearly and convincingly explained to them. Dr. Bension’s charming personality had won him the support of all sections of our community and it is anticipated that his mission here will prove a great success.⁸⁶

⁸¹ I. Bension, “Jewry’s Grand Old Man.”

⁸² “Caroline Greenfield Arrives in Singapore,” *IM*, 9 February 1923, p. 19; Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 87: This page contains a group photograph of attendees to Ellis Ezekiel’s wedding in 1934. According to Bieder, the invitation was sent to all leading Jewish families on island. I crossed-referenced the last names on the attendee list with the SZS donation records; For an overview of wealthy Jewish residents of colonial Singapore, see J.E. Nathan, *The Census of British Malaya (The Straits Settlements, Federated Malay States and Protected States of Johore, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Trengganu and Brunei)*, (1921), 91.

⁸³ Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 85.

⁸⁴ Nathan, *The History of Jews in Singapore*, 76-77; J. Goldstein, “Across the Indian Ocean,” 107.

⁸⁵ Nathan, *The History of Jews in Singapore*, 77: Shooker eventually wrote a large check of \$2000 to Alexander Goldstein, upon learning that Eze’s father Eliahu Nathan was a revered member of the Baghdadi community.

⁸⁶ *IM*, 11 April 1924, p. 17.

Jerusalem-born Bension could communicate effectively in Arabic, and his personality added power to his persuasion. Although Singapore's Baghdadi elites were all well-educated in English and could only speak Arabic colloquially, they possessed a deep attachment to their Baghdadi identity. By addressing them in Arabic, Bension showed courtesy and respect and earned the goodwill of the community, who reciprocated with generous donations to the KH. Bension was also well-liked by Shanghai's Baghdadi community for the same reasons.⁸⁷ It is, therefore, no surprise that his two missions to Singapore yielded the largest donations of all the visits by Zionist emissaries.

Another key feature of Singapore Zionism was the pluralistic communal character of the SZS's leadership. Many of Meyer's entourage in the SZS and its leading donors consisted of Ashkenazim, aside from Joe Elias and Edward Nathan. They include Abraham Frankel, a Lithuanian-Romanian Jew in real estate and furniture businesses and one of the wealthiest individuals in Singapore;⁸⁸ Victor Clumeck, Abraham Frankel's son-in-law who was born in Jaffa and raised in Cairo;⁸⁹ Joseph Levy (vice president), a German-born wine merchant;⁹⁰ Alfred Montor, a German-born jewelry business owner;⁹¹ and Charles Ginsburg (honorary secretary, 1922-1928), an American Jew and son-in-law of Victor Clumeck.⁹²

Their leadership significantly improved the fundraising efficacy of the SZS. As German speakers, Alfred Montor and his wife Anna hosted the Einsteins in 1922 and served as their translators during their stay in Singapore, which greatly facilitated the couple's social engagement with the local Jewish community.⁹³ Abraham Frankel, Victor Clumeck, and Joseph Levy were the SZS's three largest donors after the Meyers. Frankel and Clumeck's wives, Rosa and Marie, were close friends of Mozelle Nissim and played active roles in her local branch of the Women's International Zionist Organization.⁹⁴ Eze Nathan remarks that Frankels and the Clumecks were the "most industrious and best-loved Ashkenazi" families in Singapore, indicating the broad appeal of these elite Ashkenazi families within and beyond the predominantly Sephardi Jewish community in Singapore.⁹⁵

For Singapore's Baghdadi Jews who supported Zionism in the 1920s, their range of choices was narrowed in the decade that followed. In 1930, the growing volatility of the situation in Palestine led to the issuance of the White Paper, which signaled a reversal of British policies on Jewish immigration and land purchase in Mandate Palestine and created uncertainty for the political future of the *Yishuv*. Britain's decision created a deep schism within the Zionist movement and shook the commitment of many anglophile upper-class Jews in the British Empire. These ramifications also affected the Baghdadi Jews in Singapore.

⁸⁷ See Chapter Two, section 2.2.

⁸⁸ Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 60, 112: The Frankel family left for San Francisco before the Japanese invasion in World War II.

⁸⁹ Nathan, *The History of Jews in Singapore*, 63; Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 29; Lisa Ginsburg, "Worlds Apart in Singapore: A Jewish Family Story," *Asian Jewish Life*, no. 15 (October 2014): Victor Clumeck was raised in Cairo's French-speaking Jewish community. He was the owner of A. Clouet & Co, specializing in food and building materials import. He was married to Marie, the daughter of Abraham and Rosa Frankel.

⁹⁰ Nathan, *The History of Jews in Singapore*, 63: Joseph Levy was vice president of SZS and proprietor of Chandlers & Wine Merchants. He and his wife were both ardent Zionists and eventually emigrated to Palestine.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 60: Alfred Montor's jewelry firm was Singapore's main importer of Kimberly diamonds, Parker Pen, and Revlon.

⁹² Ginsburg, "Worlds Apart in Singapore": Charlie Ginsburg was the son-in-law of Victor and Marie Clumeck.

⁹³ *IM*, 1 December, p. 17; Einstein, *The Travel Diaries*, 111-17.

⁹⁴ *IM*, 15 May 1929, p. 2.

⁹⁵ Nathan, *The History of Jews in Singapore*, 62-63.

Conclusion: David Marshall, Fighting for and Negotiating with the British

Ultimately, like many of their counterparts in Shanghai, Singapore's Baghdadi Jews felt compelled to prioritize their loyalty to the British over their support for Zionism. As editor of *Israelight*, David Marshall publicly condemned the act of an ardent Zionist emissary traveling to Singapore from Palestine in 1934, who scolded the island's Jewish families for not responding to his house-to-house appeal for donations. Eze Nathan remarked that most of the Jews in Singapore agreed with Marshall on this occasion and believed that all decisions on matters related to the Holy Land "should be made within the community" and their "loyalties to Singapore and the British should not appear questionable."⁹⁶

The Jewish elites in Singapore actively showed their allegiance to Britain by enlisting in military service during World War II. When the Japanese invasion was imminent, Marshall joined the Singapore Volunteer Corps, an auxiliary militia group formed by the British colonial government to defend Singapore.⁹⁷ T. A. D. Sassoon, another Marshall's editorial team member at *Israelight* and scion of the Singapore branch of the Sassoon family, was in London when the war broke out and enlisted in the Royal Air Force.⁹⁸ Eze Nathan followed his friends and joined the Medical Auxiliary Service in Singapore. This loyalty also applied to Ashkenazim: Nathaniel Clumeck, son of SZS leader Victor Clumeck, joined the RAF in India.⁹⁹

Their loyalty to Britain came at a heavy price. During the Japanese occupation, Marshall and other Jews who remained in Singapore were interned at Japanese labor camps as enemy nationals and suffered malnutrition, dysentery, and malaria. Some youths were assigned to work at the Thailand-to-Burma "Death Railway." Marshall was sent to Hokkaido to work at a coal mine.¹⁰⁰

Years later, when the same David Marshall led an all-party delegation as Singapore's Chief Minister to negotiate the colony's future with Britain, he insisted that Singapore be granted full internal self-government but also asked Britain to retain control over foreign policy and external defence.¹⁰¹ Like many Jewish elites, he believed that British protection was indispensable for Singapore's independence and survival in the post-colonial era.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁹⁷ Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 89.

⁹⁸ Nathan, *The History of Jews in Singapore*, 91.

⁹⁹ Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 93.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 93, 111.

¹⁰¹ C. M. Turnbull, *History of Modern Singapore : 1819-2005* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 265. Chan, *A Political Biography of David Marshall*, 183.

¹⁰² Ash Dharmasingham, "East of Suez: A British Strategy for the Asian Century" (diss. Kings College London, 2017): At the insistence of Marshall and other early leaders of Singapore, the Royal Navy has maintained a presence at the Singapore Naval Base since the country's independence.