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THE HISTORY  
OF  
JEWS IN SINGAPORE  
1830-1945



A personal account by *Eze Nathan*

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JEW<sup>—</sup> IN<sup>—</sup> SINGAPORE<sup>—</sup>

1830-1945

*Eze Nathan*

**The History of Jews in Singapore (1830-1945)**

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"Before a child is born, a light is held behind its head with which it can see from one end of the world to the other, and they teach it the whole of the Torah. But at the moment of birth an angel touches it on the lips, and it forgets all. So, all of life is spent remembering what we once knew."

**Based on tractate Niddah**

# Dedication and apologies

## Dedication

To my children and grandchildren and to the memory of my beloved parents and brother, Ivor.

## Apologies

May I beg the reader's indulgence for any inaccuracies or omissions.

# Acknowledgement

I am deeply grateful for the vigilant, critical but caring help I have received from my wife, Nina, in the preparation and editing of this manuscript.

My thanks, too, to my sister, Gladys Mitchell, whose hospitality made it possible for me to carry out further research in Singapore and who, although at the outset somewhat sceptical about my having the resolution to achieve my objective, once the manuscript was completed, has given of her time unstintingly to guide it to publication.

I am also indebted to the staff of the National Library and National Archives in Singapore and the British Museum in London for their courteous help.

# Foreword

Interest in its history is one of the first symptoms of a mature society. It has taken our community in Singapore one hundred and fifty years to awaken to an interest in its history!

Fortunately, for more than fifty years within that period, a member of our community had this interest in the very marrow of his bones. Almost from his youth, Eze Nathan was recognised by all in our community as the high priest of our community's welfare and the keeper of our historical facts and figures. He had this interesting and fortunate need to know the community and to serve it, which he did faithfully and well for many a decade.

This book is the fruit of his earnest, honest labours to record for posterity the origins and development of our community in Singapore. The value of this book is in the acknowledged absolute integrity of its author in gathering and recording the results of his passionate interest and research in the minutiae of the growth of our community.

I commend this book to every home where young people need to know their cultural roots; and as a fellow member of our community, I express my gratitude to Eze Nathan for his labour of love over many long years in the service of the community he loves.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'David Marshall', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

**David Marshall**

*Singapore Ambassador to France*

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# Prologue

Before the occupation of Singapore by the Japanese, I had compiled records of the history of the Singapore Jewish Community. I had also kept a notebook of interviews I had had with the elders of the community. During the Japanese Occupation of South-east Asia, in World War II (1939–45), all early communal records were lost. My notes, too, disappeared. I have had, therefore, to rely on memory, interviews with the surviving elders and published material, in my attempt to piece together the pre-war history of our community.

Geographically, the island of Singapore before the recent extensive land reclamation had an area of approximately 206 square miles, measuring 28 miles from east to west and 14 miles from north to south. It is separated from the Malay Peninsular by the Straits of Johore, a channel varying in width from three-quarters of a mile to two miles. The highest point is a small hill, **Bukit Timah** (Hill of Tin), only 500 feet above sea level. The Plain, so named by Sir Stamford Raffles, on which the town now stands, is composed chiefly of beds of sand, mostly silica, with about ten per cent alumina. Deep beds of sandstone, heavily impregnated with ironstone, form the basic geological structure of the land.

The earliest history of Singapore is lost in the mists of time. It seems few chronicles were written and even fewer remain. We glean a few facts, however, from an account written in 1365. The island was originally called **Tumasik** and the narrow western entrance of its natural harbour, into which the Chinese sailed their junks, was then named **Loong Ya Men** (Dragon's Teeth Gate).

The palaces of early kings were built on the main hill overlooking the harbour. The Malays named the hill **Bukit Laran-gan** (Forbidden Hill) for the populace were forbidden to ascend the royal seat of kings. Today, it is known as **Fort Canning**. **Tumasik** was strategically placed between India and China — at the southern tip of Malaya and immediately north and north-west of the East Indies. Far back in recorded time, there existed a great trade route, bringing silk and spices from China to all parts of the world. It passed through Tumasik. The trading post itself was situated near the shore and was given a proud Sanskrit name in visionary

anticipation of its later fame, **Singapura** (Lion City). That it was a highly valued site can be gauged from the number of battles fought over its possession. Yet, in 1365, it fell to the Javanese who, jealous of its former pre-eminence, destroyed it. But Tumasik itself was virtually indestructible. We know that it continued to be a port of call, not only for legitimate traders, but also for pirates. For over 400 years it was to be a haunt for cut-throats, their scurrilous exploits living on in tale and legend. For most of that period, though sea and sky painted the island in the brightest of hues, its history is veiled in conjecture.

Much of the early history of the Jewish connection with the Far East is also a matter of conjecture. From the reign of King David, Palestine was already recognised as the highway between Africa and Asia and when he occupied the port of Ezion-Geber on the Gulf of Akaba, he commanded the bridge which joined three continents. He, and later King Solomon, encouraged the Phoenicians to use the port for their brilliant sea-faring enterprises. Hebrew sailors are known to have sailed with them and, King Solomon himself, participated in trade with the Orient so that the wondrous rare beasts and commodities of the Far East became familiar in Jerusalem.

But colonies of Jews are not known to have settled in India and China until much later, after the series of disasters that struck their land. The Assyrian conquerors, Tiglath Pileser III (745-28 B.C.E.) and Sargon II (722-05), deported many thousands of Jews from the Northern Kingdom of Israel. After Nebuchadnessar's destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E., there were many more deportations.

Later, partly again as a result of the occupation of their land, colonies of Jews were founded throughout the vast Hellenic world and on the Arabian peninsula. The Jewish Commonwealth came to an end in 70 C.E. and there followed a vast, continuous exodus of Jews from Judaea to foreign Jewish settlements. It was from this period that legends of the Lost Tribes originated and with them, tales of Jewish travellers who discovered far-flung colonies of Jews. Fact and legend, legend and fact, became interwoven in the fabric of the story.

There is ample proof, however, that Jews settled in India during the time of the Babylonian exile. In his *"History of Kerala"*, K.K. Menon relates how a Roman merchantship, plying between the Red Sea and Malabar on the south-west coast of India early in the second century of the Common Era,

found a Jewish colony in that area.

In the famous Pardesi Synagogue of Jewtown in Cochin, in the province of Mysore, are two copper plates on which is inscribed the *Sassanam* (Charter) accorded to Joseph Rabban by His Majesty, King Sri Parkaran Iravi Vanmar. They were given to him as patents of his nobility and record the special privileges bestowed on him. The principality of Anjuvannam became his. He was allowed to ride on an elephant or be carried in a litter and he was to be shielded from the sun by a state umbrella. Furthermore, whenever he ventured out in public, he was to be preceded ceremoniously by drummers and trumpeters.

It is probable that Jews settled in the Bombay Presidency at the time that Joseph Rabban was building up his reputation in Cochin. Today, there are still members of a sect who call themselves *Bene Israel* (Sons of Israel) living in the region although several hundreds of them emigrated to Israel in 1951. They speak *Mahratti*, the regional vernacular, bear *Mahratti* names and wear Indian clothes, but they are convinced that they are Jews. They observe the *Shabbat* (the Sabbath), refrain from work and attend services in the synagogue. Locally, they are known as *Shanwar Teles* (Saturday oilmen) because they light up oil lamps to greet the *Shabbat*. They claim their descent from Jews who fled from Judaea during the atrocities perpetrated by Antiochus Epiphanes immediately before the Maccabean Revolt in 175 B.C.E.

They believe that their forefathers were journeying to India by sea when a storm arose, and they were shipwrecked on the Konkan Coast, 30 miles south of Bombay. The *Sefer Torah* (Scroll of the Law) that they had brought with them, and jealously guarded on the hazardous voyage, was lost. They have mourned its loss ever since. Without it, they remained ignorant of the Hebrew Language and the written law for many centuries.

No Jewish community has a stranger history than the Jews of China. Today, there are possibly only a few hundred Chinese Jews. So rare have they become that they have been referred to as "ethnological museum specimens"! But they have a proud history.

It is considered a reasonable supposition that, during the period of the Maccabees, some of our resourceful ancestors escaped from persecution and took refuge in the Chinese province of Honan, in the ancient city of K'aifeng on the Yel-

low River. Their increase in numbers and influence was such that a Chinese emperor of the T'ang Dynasty in the seventh century C.E. appointed a mandarin to look after their welfare. Once a year, this princely official entered what has been described as their exquisite synagogue at K'aifeng to burn incense before the altar in the name of the emperor whom he represented.

Chinese emperors continued to grant the Jews full protection and accorded them courteous treatment. At the very period when the Crusaders were savagely exterminating hundreds of Jewish communities in Europe, a Chinese emperor welcomed Jewish immigrants with these words: "You have come to our China; revere and preserve the customs of your ancestors." He provided them help in the form of encouragement and materials when they planned to build a synagogue. From this time, frequent official mention appeared in the Imperial records.

Chinese surnames such as **Shih**, **Li**, **Al** and **Ha** became common among the Jews in China. They acquired a nickname, the *Blue Mussalmen*, but more often they were referred to simply as K'aifeng Jews. Apparently, they resembled their hosts in so many ways that they first became favoured guests and then respected citizens. Writers have noted their qualities of gentleness, their devotion to the study of religious writings and their reverence for tradition and their ancestors.

In time the Jews began to disappear from the records. They were not forcibly converted, neither were they persecuted nor driven out of the country. They were gradually absorbed, biologically and culturally, into the society which had so warmly welcomed them. They did not vanish without a trace. Travellers have told tales of meeting Chinese citizens, who were convinced of their Jewish origins though there was little evidence that they practised the Jewish faith. Their story has yet to be told.

During my childhood days, I used to see an elderly gentleman in Chinese attire among the worshippers in the synagogue. I believe he was a descendant of the K'aifeng Jews but all I know about this gentleman is that he was employed in the firm of Raphael Sassoon.

Jewish communities established themselves at strategic points on the busy sea and caravan routes from Mesopotamia through India and Malaya to the East Indies and China many centuries ago. Surely, then, it is possible that some of these early travellers visited the trading post of *Singapura* and noted

its splendid potential. But this is pure speculation.

It is a fact, however, that the Jewish community of Singapore springs primarily from Mesopotamia. Our forefathers belonged to the migration that travelled south, west and east. They became known as *Sephardi*, a name derived from the Hebrew word for Spain, *Sepharad*, where many of these early migrants settled. In the first centuries C.E., Jewish communities in Babylonia flourished. Until the middle of the 11th century, they exercised considerable influence over their brethren throughout the world. But this period was followed by a time of upheaval — war, invasions and persecution — that drove out thousands of Babylonian Jews. By the 18th century, Jewish life in Baghdad and throughout Mesopotamia had become painfully restricted. Their Moslem rulers daily devised measures to harass them. The result was emigration on a large scale. Many sought a haven in the East.

Dr Walter J Fischel, in his book, "*The Immigration of the Arabian Jews to India in the 18th century*" records the existence of a thriving Jewish colony in Surat, on the north-west coast of India. From other diverse sources, we learn that Arab-speaking Jews had vast Asian-centred commercial markets spreading between Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf and thence to the Malabar Coast of India, Malaya, Siam and China. They traded in cotton goods, mirrors, goldleaf, copper, tin, coral, coffee, raisins, almonds, spices, indigo, sandalwood, elephant tusks, coconuts, saltpetre and timber.

Ashkenasi Jews were also on the move. Australia received Jews from Britain and Europe from 1788. By 1831, they had organised themselves into a settled community in Sydney. Meanwhile, the East India Company was extending its influence and in 1805, it acquired the island of Penang, off the Malayan coast, with a strip of mainland territory.

Stamford Raffles, who had been a clerk with the East India Company since 1795, secured Singapore for the British in 1819. In 1826, just before Raffles' untimely death, Penang, Malacca and Singapore were brought together under the title *Straits Settlements*. But before his death, he had succeeded in laying a firm foundation for the future development of the new settlements.

Raffles' vision grew out of his respect for the peoples of the East, his faith in commerce as a civilising force and the need for an orderly, multi-racial society. With these ends in view, he created a well-organised Malayan government, provided a codification of native law, built a residence for the governor,

the *Istana Negara*, on Fort Canning, established schools and founded the Singapore Institute, which was designed for the study of the life and language of the Eastern world.

Furthermore, he urged that the important role played by merchants in building up British prosperity and influence overseas should be fully recognised. That this had not always been the case is revealed in the following passage written in a despatch to the Supreme Government, dated 29th March, 1823:

"I am satisfied that nothing has tended more to the discomfort and constant jarring which have, hitherto, occurred in our remote settlements than the policy which has dictated to the exclusion of the European merchants from all share — much less credit — in the domestic regulation of the settlements of which they are frequently its most important members."

Although Raffles was making a plea specifically for European merchants, the freer atmosphere he wished to create would inevitably benefit merchants of all nationalities. Singapore, under his guidance began to prosper and grow rapidly. It attracted visitors from many parts of the world. None gave vent to their feelings of surprise and admiration more forcibly than a prominent Dutch officer, Colonel Nahuijs. In a letter to his superior in Holland, he described the harbour already teeming with ships of many nations and then went on:

"I believe that no person with any feeling can help being impressed when setting foot in Singapore, because he can now see a seat of European trade and industry, a place which only five years before was a cavern and hiding place for murderers and pirates . . . Ground standing vacant is obtainable by any person without payment whatsoever . . . The climate is healthy but very warm. Drinking water is good . . . Reservoirs are being constructed."

Colonel Nahuijs, obviously, saw the Straits Settlements as a threat to the Dutch East Indies and while not being able to withhold his praise, he stressed that there were difficulties to overcome. "The cost of living is very high as the island produces little or nothing," he wrote. He added, also, that there was still little protection from pirates and that "foreign capital will be necessary for all projects."

These difficulties did not deter the immigrants. They came in their hundreds and among them were a small number of Jews.

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## Chapter One

# The early history

**“Happy are they who live in Thy house;  
they shall be ever praising Thee.”**

— Psalm 84.

The first recorded entry, referring to the presence of Jews in Singapore, was dated 1830. In that year, a census of **traders** included an entry: **Nine traders of the Jewish faith**. We do not know if the nine merely spent a few days ashore or set up their businesses at the trading centre, but we must surely number them among the pioneers of our community.

Another census in 1833, this time of **settlers**, recorded: **Jews . . . 3**, which was a brief and anonymous entry, but of great significance. Only eight years later, a census of settlers numbered Jews as 22 (males 18, females 4). The first three **traders** might have viewed the prospects offered by Singapore favourably, returned to their country of origin to fetch their wives and families and sailed back to this jungle-clad and swampy outpost, risking their lives for the promise of a prosperous future. By 1846, of the 43 merchant houses recorded, twenty were British, **six Jewish**, five Chinese, five Arab and two Armenian.

Plying the pirate-infested seas, at that time, was a Jewish captain of a trading vessel. It was his untimely death at sea that has provided us with proof of his existence. There was no Jewish cemetery then, so he was buried in the Christian cemetery at Fort Canning. Before the Japanese Occupation, I took a picture of his grave and the stone, which was inscribed in Hebrew characters. I cannot reproduce it as it was lost with my other records during the war. When I looked for the grave after the Japanese surrender, I found things very changed. Only the headstones of certain graves had been preserved. They had been collected and mounted around the boundary walls, but the captain's headstone was missing.

It is unlikely that there were any other Jews buried in the Christian cemetery, as our founding fathers proved themselves devoted to their heritage and far-sighted in preserving it. Although there were scarcely sufficient males



to guarantee a *minyan* (a quorum of ten), the parents took steps to ensure that their children would live and die as Jews. In Chapter 248 of the Laws of the Straits Settlements Volume V, published in 1936, the following notice appeared:

"Whereas by an indenture of the lease of the first day of September 1841, the late Government of these Settlements demised on a peppercorn rent a certain piece of land, situated in Synagogue Street in Singapore Town, estimated to contain 5,414 square feet, to Joseph Dwek Cohen, Nassim Joseph Ezra, Ezra Ezekiel, their successors, representatives and assignees, as Trustees for the Jewish inhabitants of Singapore for the purpose of erecting and maintaining thereon for the use of the Jewish inhabitants, a synagogue or place of Divine worship with a proviso that the said piece of land should be resumed by Government in the event of the same being appropriated for any other purpose than that of Divine worship."

The three trustees, who came originally from Calcutta, not only put their plans for the synagogue into action immediately, but also probably in 1843, acquired a plot of land for a cemetery. It was situated in what was at that time the outskirts of town, behind Fort Canning, and it later became known as the **Orchard Road Cemetery** or the Old Cemetery. The lease was for 99 years. The trustees have been criticised by the post-war generation for acquiring only a 99-year lease instead of freehold. However, it must be said that in those early days of settlement, there was little evidence that land was offered *freehold* as the government encouraged citizens to obtain land for cultivation on a *lease*. Yet, the action of the trustees cannot be entirely exonerated as the Orchard Road Cemetery was in a very swampy area on the very fringe of the jungle. It would seem that had they exerted a little more pressure, they could have obtained a longer lease.

**Synagogue Street** is in the old commercial district of Boat Quay, off South Canal Road and just behind the present Central Police Station. The synagogue, that was built there, was almost indistinguishable from the shophouses on either side of it. For about 30 years, it served the little community as a place for divine worship. Then, it was sold as a shophouse. I visited the premises in 1938 and was most courteously welcomed by the Chinese occupants who showed me around. They told me how happy they were to live in a house that had once been a house of prayer for the *Orang Jaudee* (Jewish people). They felt it was a house of good omen and