

WE CONTINUE OUR SERIES, BASED ON INTERVIEWS AND IMAGES FROM THE ARCHIVE OF SEPHARDI VOICES UK, THAT UNCOVERS THE STORIES OF SEPHARDIM FROM AROUND THE WORLD



THIS ISSUE:

How Baghdad's eternal summer turned to a climate of fear

Eileen Khalastchi was born in Baghdad in 1929 and lived through some of the most tumultuous times in Iraqi history. She talks to Linda Dangoor and Bea Lewkowicz of Sephardi Voices UK about the Jewish community that lived in Iraq's capital. Portrait Rob Greig

SEPHARDI VOICES: Tell me about your family.

EILEEN KHALASTCHI: My grandfather Haham Ezra Dangoor was the Chief Rabbi of Baghdad. He used to give his wages to the poor. He was a very good man. He had a printing works that printed Hebrew books, including a Haggadah, which had his name in it. My father carried on the business,

printing textbooks in Arabic. First we lived in a Jewish area in Dorat Street. My most vivid memory of that time is of a cow that our neighbours used to milk in front of our house. I had a small bottle to fill with milk for me to drink. This is how it used to be, to have the cow milked near the house.

Then we moved to Bataween, which was a mixed neighbourhood – many Jews

lived there. I went to the Laura Kadoorie School, the Alliance Israelite school. I left school in 1946, when I was 16, and went to the British Institute to learn more English.

Our family was very religious. We learnt Hebrew at school, but after a few years this was forbidden. This was the late 1930s and it started to be difficult for the Jews. Sometimes there were demonstrations. I remember my father used to send someone to bring us home from school. Then he employed a teacher at home for my sister and me to learn Hebrew.

On Yom Kippur 1940 there was an incident. After we broke our fast, my brother took my sister and me for a walk. I saw someone on a bicycle pass by. And then I felt something hot on my back. He threw acid on my back. Thank God it wasn't on my face. The next day we went to the police. Nothing came of it.

SV: Were [Jewish] people worried?
EK: Yes. But we were Iraqis. We cherished our country. So whatever happened we never thought of leaving. We had good Muslim friends. My brother had a Muslim [business] partner and the families were good friends. They live in London, and we are still like one family. But the government was against us.

In 1941 there was the Farhoud [the pogrom against Iraqi Jews]. It was Shavuot. Mobs went to Jewish houses and even took Jews from a bus and killed them. It went on for two days and we were really afraid. My father took me and my mother and sister to our Muslim friends. Only my three brothers and father remained in the house. Our cook told us afterwards that the mob came to the house and tried to break the door. One of the rioters said, "Don't go to this house; they are nice people. I'm not coming with you." So they didn't break in.

One of my brothers was in the army and the head of the army liked him. My father used to give him presents. He came to the house that morning with two soldiers, and told them, "You have to take care of the family, so nobody can break in."

We had a big house with a big garden and when my brothers got married they lived in the same house. This was the custom. When they had their children, they had nannies, so you can imagine, we had many employees; two nannies, the cook, the maid. They quarrelled, but my mother was always the peacemaker.

SV: Who did the shopping?

EK: My father did the shopping. If we were in the car, we stopped near a shop and my father went in and bought what we needed. Or the driver got what we needed. But a woman never did the shopping.

SV: So was your mother mainly at home?

EK: Yes. In London, if you don't have a party, you don't meet anybody. But there we telephoned, we said, "Are you at home? We are coming to visit." And it's not a big fuss. I mean you don't have to make dinner. It's just tea with cookies, simple. But it's nice. Then the people we visited came back after two weeks. And this is how we used to meet our friends.

SV: What rhythm was there in terms of winter and summer?

EK: In summer we used to sleep on the roof. We had two sets of beds, one set up in the room and one set up on the roof. It's so beautiful to sleep on the roof. It's so cool, and so nice to look at the stars. I miss it. In summer the river level drops and there was an island in the middle of the river. People



Eilat and Khatoon Dangoor and their children, from left to right: Sasson, Salim, Eileen, Doreen, Natm, Abudilla (attending)

send a plate of Turkish delight and a plate of sugared almonds in a car with a maid who distributes them to friends and family. I made these plates for the bride when my son Freddy got married.

SV: Can you tell us more about the 1958 revolution?

EK: We listened to the radio and heard that there was a revolution. The king, the regent and the whole family were killed. We were frightened. But then Abdul Karim Qassim [a Communist] came to power. Things settled. He was a good leader. And he was good to the Jews. After the revolution, we had the best years – until 1963, when they overthrew Qassim. But people were afraid. One year after the revolution, my brothers left Iraq. They wanted us to leave but my father and in-laws didn't want to. It was a sad time. All our friends and most of our relatives left and we didn't know what was going to happen to us.

After 1963, when the Ba'ath party came to power, they killed Abdul Karim Qassim. Life started to be bad for the Jews. They stopped giving us passports. For ten years we couldn't leave the country. People started going illegally, through the north to Iran and then to Israel, or through Basra.

In June 1967 I was on the roof with the maid to prepare the beds. My husband was at the office. The boys [her sons] were at school. I had my radio with me and heard that war had broken out with

used to put up tents and live there for the summer. They had parties and we used to hear the music, and they made masgouf (grilled fish). It was a good time.

When my niece Linda was one year old, I wanted to surprise her parents and make a dress for her. I bought some net and I wanted her to try it. When I put the dress on her, she started screaming. I kissed her; I gave her a sweet; I said, "Please don't..." I didn't want her parents to hear her screaming. It was a beautiful dress, and she wore it on her first birthday. I still have a picture of her wearing it.

In 1948, when Israel was born, Iraqis turned against the Jews again. My father was arrested like many others, for no reason. That night a friend phoned whose father was also arrested. He said, "They are coming to search. If you have any [postage] stamps with Palestine on them, get rid of them." So we burnt everything with Hebrew on it. And the next day they searched the house.

We used to have three Jewish clubs. We used to go [to them] all the time. But after 1948 the government took the clubs from us. But in 1952, there was the Mansour Club: a mixed club with Muslims, Christians and Jews. It held parties and there was bingo, swimming, tennis and films, and we were members.

We had a good life after 1952. I got married at the Mansour Club in 1955.

SV: How did you meet your husband?

EK: His sister was my best friend. We knew each other as children. We met in 1954 at his younger sister's wedding in Paris. He went back to Baghdad and asked my father if he could marry me. Then my uncle came from London to Paris to ask me. I stayed in Paris for another two months to make my trousseau. I heard that my in-laws sent my father a huge tray of Turkish delight, too large to go through the front door even with both doors open! It is the custom to

"I felt something hot. Someone had thrown acid on my back"

Israel. I ran downstairs and telephoned my husband. I said, "Quickly, we have to get the boys." My husband heard them say on the radio, "We have brought down 70 Israeli airplanes". They were making up stories – Israel was winning – but the radio said the Arabs were winning.

My husband brought the boys home. We sat near the radio. My husband listened to one station; I listened to another. The Israeli radio only had music. We started believing that the Arabs were winning. Later that night, Israel gave the full news. And we were relieved.

My father, who had been arrested in 1948, was arrested again in 1967. He was well known and had enemies – or the government just took him as they did many others. My husband had friends in high positions. One was a general. Muslims were afraid to say they were friendly with Jews. But this man said to my husband, "I am your friend and I'll come to visit you" →