



The architect from Baghdad who rebuilt his life in London

Julian Sofaer fled Iraq with his family following the spate of antisemitic violence that shook Baghdad in the summer of 1941. He went on to become an architect, designing a number of striking public buildings across London. Before his death in 2017 he spoke to **Dr Bea Lewkowicz** from Sephardi Voices UK about his Iraqi childhood and life in London, where he developed a passion for design with a humanist touch

BEA LEWKOWICZ: Tell us about your family.

JULIAN SOFAER: My father died [in 1926] when I was two years old. I was more connected to my mother's side of the family. The North Star in my life was my maternal grandfather, Abraham Haim, who started his working life during the Ottoman occupation, then worked for the British, and in 1932 when Iraq became independent he became a member of parliament. He was one of six Jewish men representing the community at the

Palais des Nations [the United Nations headquarters] in Geneva. My grandmother Rachel Haim was the first Iraqi woman to sit in the spectator's gallery. To me, my grandfather was an inspiring person. I loved him very deeply.

BL: How did your mother cope with your father's death?

JS: When my father died she was 21 years old, with three children, and so she went to live with her parents. She stayed with them for a few months and then declared

independence. She bought a small house, and created her own household of which she was extremely proud. I remember one day she did something extraordinary. She went into the market – it was unusual for a woman to go out [alone] – and she bought a gramophone and two records of an Egyptian singer called Umm Kulthum. This became a symbol of her independence. After a few years, we bought a much bigger house, which was looted in 1941, during the pogrom [the Farhud of 1-2 June 1941].





BL: What happened in the Farhud?

JS: Sunday 1 June 1941 was also the first day of Shavuot. I was standing outside my house and a fellow Jewish student came along and said, "Don't go, don't go out. They've started killing Jews." As he walked towards the end of the street he was surrounded by people. Later I learned that he was murdered.

On the night of the pogrom, my sister and I were alone at the house because my mother had gone to stay with her parents on the west side of the river. We were caught in the house alone. How can I describe it to you? There was a period of eerie silence, I suppose that was when the marauders were surrounding Jewish people. Then there was a huge hysterical cry, presumably when a crime had been committed. There was a lot of shrieking and screaming that went on right through the night. We were expecting the worst. A lot of people were raped and murdered, including children.

The next morning my uncle telephoned and said, "Stand behind the door. When you see the car, jump out and shut the door." My sister and I did just this. [A car arrived] and the thing sped out of the street and crossed the river to the other side. Afterwards the mob broke into the house, and even the toilet was broken. The house was looted. They even took the piano, and my mother – she lost her empire. This was

all she had. We left Iraq a few months later, in August '41, to go to Bombay.

BL: What it was like to arrive in India?

JS: It was bewildering. There were enormous numbers of people on the street. I had decided to become an architect and to do that I had to pass the matriculation with the University of Bombay. It was a marathon run [to pass the exam] and I passed by the skin of my teeth.

There was only one school to study architecture, the Sir JJ School of Art, and you had to take a series of competitive entrance exams that lasted a whole day. There were 28 applicants, and only four could be non-Indian. I passed and the next day I attended the first lecture. After studying there, I wanted to finish my training in London. I sent the Architectural Association a bunch of my drawings and I was accepted, but the war was on, so I had to wait until May '45, when I was able to get on a troopship going back to England.

BL: What were your initial impressions of England?

JS: London was in a shockingly bad state. There were a lot of ruined buildings, as well as deprivation, lack of food and lack of clothes. England was bankrupt or appeared to be bankrupt. You felt the war was won but shouldn't things be better now? They were not. I was a vegetarian and

all I got was six ounces of cheese a week and one egg. Fried egg and chips – that was a marvellous treat.

BL: Tell us about your architectural work?

JS: I qualified as an architect in 1948, and joined a well-known firm – Yorke, Rosenberg and Mardall. I bulldozed my way into that job, I didn't even check what they were going to pay me. At the time they were preparing for the 1951 Festival of Britain and the firm was given the job of designing the Susan Lawrence School in the East End of London. I designed a considerable portion of that. When that school was finished, we were very



COURTESY OF THE SOFAER FAMILY; ANA SUTHERLAND



proud of it. Symbolically, something you do on paper becomes a reality. But I looked at it and I remember saying to myself, "But, there's no life in it. It is mechanical." It was the product of a consciously adopted formula. That is not how you produce pedigree buildings.

In 1960, I had reached maturity as an architect and from then on, it was completely independent thinking on my part. I'm very proud of that. I worked like mad. I didn't always succeed. But I let every commission I had germinate in my head until I found a genuine way to produce a piece of work that had its own individuality, and wasn't built according to a fashion or a formula. When I succeeded, it was pretty good.

BL: What were you designing?

JS: I designed several schools, two colleges,

Clockwise from top left: Julian Sofaer's family in Baghdad (Julian is the boy leaning forward on the right), 1934; Meridian West, Blackheath; Julian at his drawing board, 1965; Wembley Synagogue exterior

about 1,200 flats and other types of housing, including homes for the aged. I worked on four synagogues and designed a home for the aged in Wembley, Edinburgh House, that had its own synagogue. In 1961, I designed the West London Synagogue youth centre and library, in Seymour Place, which received a Civic Trust Award. It was praised as being the most outstanding infill because it stood between a terrace of 19th-century buildings and the 1930s houses on the corner.

BL: Do you have a favourite building?

JS: This is the trouble with being an architect. These are my 'brain children', and I am amazed what later damage and abuse people can inflict on a building. One is my last building, an office building in an English walled garden [Sofaer was commissioned by Racal Electronics to build a training centre on the site they owned at Heckfield Place, the former home of the 18th-century aristocrat, Horace Walpole].

It was a wonderful opportunity. The other one was a commission [Meridian West], that I got in 1965 from a friend of mine who had an exceptional site in Blackheath with a garden, an orchard and a cypress tree. He wanted to build a new house there. I did 15 designs until I managed to get one which I considered

a masterpiece. It is listed by English Heritage. Although it was later bought by another architect who enlarged it, it was done sensitively and kept in character. That building remains representative of what I was about as an architect.

There were other successes, but these buildings are old and many of them – including six schools and two colleges – have been demolished.

BL: Do you see yourself as a British architect?

JS: I see myself as an architect who practised in England. My buildings are different from the sort of things that are usually accepted in England. I never climbed on any bandwagon.

BL: How would you define your identity?

JS: I'm very Jewish. If you took a photograph of my DNA, you'd probably find the Star of David in it. My Iraqi origin is painful, but a source of pride. I think that generation of my family was very brave and exceptional. They overcame a lot of difficulties which would have defeated others. They were fighters.

Hold on to your Jewishness. It is a marvellous heritage that ought to be cherished. ■

Interview edited by Daisy Abboudi.

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