

New Book (01)

A Day in Aden

October 15, 1948

This was the second installment of an article by Miss E. Shapiro, former sub-editor of the Jewish Herald, Melbourne, on Jewish communities she visited en route to England, October 15, 1948.

We, my brother Alec and I, had met a young Jew from Aden on the ship and were fortunate to have one of his relatives show us around during a short stopover there. First of all, we drove through the city and saw evidence of last December's riots. Throughout the whole of the disturbances in and around Aden, one hundred Jews were killed. Five synagogues, two schools and many houses were either burnt out or otherwise destroyed. It came as a shock to see, all of a sudden, the empty, partly demolished buildings, and the barbed wire barricades that closed off the Jewish Quarter at six in the evening. Seeing the reality is a different matter from reading headlines in the paper.

How Shabbat Was Observed

Scarcely had we taken in the significance of what we had seen when we reached the shul. It was late Friday afternoon and Shabbat was in the air. Men and boys in clean, white garments, *kipot* (skullcaps), *payot* (sidelocks) and *tallitot* (prayer shawls) were standing around waiting for sunset. On the threshold of the shul sat an old, bearded scholar with a young child, a classic picture oriental Jewish life. They were immersed in Bible study, oblivious to the growing commotion which our arrival was causing. Into the brightness and light of the synagogue poured a stream of noise and people. They crowded about us – old men, young

men, boys and children, excited at having visitors, pleased that strangers had come to visit them, eager to greet us and exchange a few words.

The *shamash* (synagogue caretaker) fluttered about trying to keep them away, fearful that we would be annoyed at their behavior, but it was no use. As some moved away others took their place, and those who could not speak directly to us pressed round to hear from secondary sources who we were, where we were from, where we were going. Despite their guttural, Yemenite Hebrew, we were able to understand and make ourselves understood. And underlying all the excitement and activity came the steady recital of *Shir Hashirim*, the Song of Songs, which the old men chanted as they sat, unmoved by our arrival.

The scene was at once familiar and strange, packed with nostalgia and pleasure, creating new impressions and arousing old associations. It was a moment out of time. Yet, despite the pressure of emotion and excitement, there was an undercurrent of sadness, of weariness, which left us depressed. In the shadow of danger, the Jews of Aden continue to live according to their religious ideals, are prepared but unable to fight in their defense, and can only dream of going to Israel; but defeatism is in the air, and their hope is a blunted one.

A Unique Group

Strangely enough, we found the antidote to our depression among people who are even worse off materially than the Aden Jews. These were the Yemenite Jewish refugees. Few people even know about the Yemenite refugee camp, or of the tremendous work being done there. It was fortunate for us that one of our party knew of its existence, otherwise we would not have visited it.

The camp is situated some ten miles outside Aden, and houses four thousand people. Over two years before the camp had been organized by the Jewish Agency and the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) for refugees who had fled from the interior under the

threat of repatriation to their former homes. Now the Joint runs the facility alone. The refugees include townspeople, hill tribesmen and shepherds, and since the December riots many Jews from Aden and neighboring Arab villages have moved in as well.

The first sight of the camp is rather a frightening one. For miles around there is no vegetation, nothing but reddish-brown sand, out of which the greater part of the camp was built. The dwellings consist of small, cellar-like rooms, half underground, which house whole families. The “residential” area is very carefully laid out in streets and squares, with primitive washing and cooking facilities outside each house. Water is laid on but there is no electricity; at night the only illumination is the flickering of kerosene lamps here and there.

Government regulations prevent the erection of more permanent and more satisfactory types of buildings and in the meantime the refugees are prevented from moving to another area. During the pogrom, they were not allowed any means of defense, and even afterwards, though a nearby Arab village remains a threat, they cannot raise a hand to stave off any aggression. Only recently was the camp given a telephone and allowed to erect barbed wire fences. So far, two groups of fifty have gone to Palestine, but the prospects for further *aliyah* (emigration) are not very bright.

However, it is amazing to see just what has been accomplished in spite of the difficulties and disappointments. The high degree of communal organization and control, achieved by half a dozen people, cannot be too highly praised. The communal part of the camp, consisting of large, weatherboard shacks, includes a school, a Beit Knesset (synagogue), a Beit Tarbut (cultural hall), a general and a maternity hospital, an orphanage, a communal kitchen and a general office. The *madrich* (community leader) of the camp is a quiet young Palestinian named Binyamin who looks no older than 25 or 26. With the aid of two assistants, he has organized and directed the educational and cultural life of the camp.

The school now has thirty-two classes, all taught by teachers who graduated from the school. The language of the camp is Hebrew and the school curriculum comprises reading, writing, arithmetic and elementary general knowledge. There is no need to teach them the Bible, for most of them, even though they never knew anything else, know the Torah thoroughly. Adults as well as children attend the classes, as do the hill tribesmen amongst them, who never cut their hair and spend most of their time “lernen.” Binyamin told us that their fanatic religiosity was a great problem and a hindrance to progress. It had taken a considerable time even to get the boys and girls to mix together at school and in communal activities.

“Mother of the Camp”

The mother of the camp is Dr. Olga Fineberg, a Russian Jewess who graduated in America and has spent twelve years in Palestine. Until a few weeks ago, when a nurse came to join the staff, she had only one medical assistant to help her. Dr. Fineberg can boast a higher birthrate and a lower deathrate than in the whole country. In a population of four thousand, two thousand children are aged under fourteen. But in a sense they are all children, for they are essentially a primitive people, and the task of disciplining and looking after such a community is not an enviable one. Their curiosity about us was even greater than that of the Jews in Bombay and Aden and, of course, on a larger scale. When we got up to walk around the camp, it seemed as if all the inhabitants were bent on accompanying us – in front of us, beside us, behind us – almost falling over themselves in their childlike excitement.

Like all naïve people, the Yemenites love to sing, and the crowning moment of our visit came when the children gathered for their evening sing-song. Tightly packed into a small classroom, they lifted their voices in perfect unity and clarity and welcomed in the

Shabbat. Through the open doors and windows, into the stillness of the desert night poured a stream of rich melody, the enjoyment of Shabbat Shalom.

We had never heard such singing, and I doubt whether we shall ever hear it again; they sang with such feeling, such ringing strength and intensity, that we were swept along with the tide of their voices. Here was the strength and the hope we had missed in Bombay and Aden, the fervor and the significance that we had never known in Australia. In that moment, everything else we had known became trivial and pointless; only these young voices in the desert had any meaning. This was the fruit of the hard, self-sacrificing work of the *madrichim*; this made everything worthwhile. "In another couple of years we'll make good citizens of them," Binyamin said, and we too felt confident.

We left the camp, feeling happier, safer and surer than we had felt for a long time, regretting only that we had not been able to stay there at least for a few days to be of some assistance in such inspiring, constructive work.