



OPERATION ARTIFACT

Jewish groups do not want the rescued
Iraqi Jewish Archive to be returned to Iraq

By Renee Ghert-Zand *Washington*

ON A chilly mid-December day about 100 people gathered at New Montefiore Cemetery in the town of West Babylon, New York, to witness the burial of a box containing irreparably damaged fragments of holy scrolls that once belonged to the Jewish community in Iraq.

The fragments, mainly of Torah scrolls and a Scroll of Esther, were part of a collection of 2,700 books and tens of thousands of documents that were saved in the spring and summer of 2003 from the flooded basement of Saddam Hussein's Muhabarat (intelligence agency) offices in Baghdad.

Just days after coalition forces took control

of Baghdad, a US Army team searching for weapons of mass destruction was informed of the submerged collection by Iraqi National Congress chairman Ahmed Chalabi, who was in turn tipped off by a former intelligence official trying to curry favor with the post-Saddam authorities.

The damaged items discovered ranged from the ephemera of daily life, like school report cards and financial records from the 1960s and 1970s, to a 400-year-old Torah scroll, a 200-year-old Talmud and a copy of the *Ketuvim* (Writings) part of the Bible, published in Venice in 1568.

The documents had been confiscated

from Iraqi Jews and Jewish Iraqi institutions by Saddam's Ba'athist regime. However, persecution of the two-millennia-old Iraqi Jewish community predates Saddam. Discrimination and violence against Jews in Iraq began with Nazi-influenced Arab nationalism in the 1930s, at which time one-third of Baghdad's residents were Jewish.

Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the criminalization in Iraq of Zionism, most of Iraq's Jews fled the country. They were forced to give up their Iraqi citizenship and leave behind all money and personal property. Emigration was banned in 1952, and the several thousands of

Jews who remained suffered arbitrary arrests and economic isolation. A final group made it out in the early 1970s, and today, there are virtually no Jews living in Iraq.

With the burial, the fragments had apparently come to their final resting place. Less clear, however, is what will be the ultimate disposition of the remaining tens of thousands of artifacts, known collectively as the Iraqi Jewish Archive (IJA). They are currently in the custody of the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), which is restoring, cataloguing and digitizing them. (More than half of the items are already available for online viewing on a specially dedicated website, www.ija.archives.gov.)

Twenty-four of the artifacts were on view at a special exhibition at the National Archives in Washington that closed on January 5. The exhibition, "Discovery and Recovery: Preserving Iraqi Jewish Heritage," will travel to the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, where it will be shown between February 4 and May 18.

THE FACT that the Iraqi ambassador to the United States, along with a delegation of five other Iraqi government officials, attended the mid-December burial ceremony, together with US government representatives and members of the American-Iraqi Jewish community, should not be taken as a sign that all parties have come together in agreement on what should happen to the archive.

The Republic of Iraq expects the archive to be returned to it by mid-2014, after NARA has done its job. The Iraqi Embassy had no comment on why Iraq wants personal and religious documents from a population it persecuted and drove away.

It appears that the State Department is planning to abide by an agreement signed in August 2003 between the Iraqi Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and NARA, and stating that NARA will return the archive upon completion of its restoration, digitization and exhibition to the CPA.

According to leaders of the American Iraqi Jewish community, the documents are the property and patrimony of Iraqi Jews and should therefore be handed over to the

Jewish artifacts (right and above left) rescued from the flooded basement of Saddam Hussein's Muhabarat (intelligence agency) offices in Baghdad
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY US NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION (NARA)





community. A coalition of organizations, including the World Organization of Jews from Iraq, JIMENA (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa) and Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC), has been working intensively to make the community's case with lawmakers and in the media. As part of its campaign, it launched a website (iraqijewisharchives.org) with rich and up-to-date content on the IJA and efforts to keep it from being returned to Iraq.

The Iraqi Jewish community's position has been supported by the heads of more than 40 major American Jewish organizations, which have signed a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry asking him to intervene. In addition, nearly 50 members of Congress sent a bi-partisan letter to Kerry in November expressing their concern about the return of the archive to Iraq.

"We are committed to ensuring justice for the Iraqi Jewish community and their descendants and to seeing that these important artifacts that were confiscated from them are rightfully returned to their community," they wrote.

"The Iraqis don't really care about the archive," says Harold Rhode, who helped recover the material from the Mukhabarat offices basement. In 2003, Rhode was an Arabic and Hebrew-speaking policy analyst with the Office of Net Assessments in the Office of the US Secretary of Defense assigned to the CPA.

RHODE EXPLAINS the Iraqi stance in terms of the Arabic concept of *ayb* (shame), meaning that no one wants to be blamed for giving in to the Americans or Jews and handing over the records. "Any Iraqi who does so will be shamed in others' eyes, which in Arab society must be avoided at all costs," he explains to *The Jerusalem Report*.

In order to avoid this problem, Rhode says the Iraqis must appear as if they are being magnanimous, that they control the issue. If they are seen as the controllers, then they might allow the records to stay for a longer period of time in the US. "The idea that the Iraqis will publicly give up control here is out of the question. They cannot do so," he notes.

The impending return of the archive to



(Top) Harold Rhode in the flooded Mukhabarat basement in 2003; (middle and bottom) initial restoration work at the NARA labs in College Park, Maryland

Baghdad is cause for great concern. “There are currently hundreds of Torah scrolls in the basement of the National Museum of Iraq, where they are exposed to mold and rats. That doesn’t bode well for the return of the IJA to Iraq,” Rhode says. “Besides, who’s to say a group won’t come along and blow the whole thing up?”

THESE IMPORTANT JEWISH ARTIFACTS THAT WERE CONFISCATED SHOULD RIGHTFULLY BE RETURNED TO THE COMMUNITY

The Iraqi government’s possible argument that the removal of the IJA is part of the “rape” of the country’s culture following the invasion of Iraq, and that it should consequently be returned, holds no water for Iraqi Jews like Joseph Dabby. Following his imprisonment three times on trumped-up spy charges, Dabby escaped Iraq via Iran in 1971. After several months as a refugee in Holland, he immigrated to Los Angeles, where he is today the chairman of Kahal Joseph, a congregation of 500 Iraqi Jews.

Dabby believes his own government is betraying him and his fellow Iraqi Jews. “I feel terrible because we always think of the US government as a fighter for fairness and justice,” he shares with The Report. “I personally don’t think the US government will do anything. It’s making a bad decision based on political motivations.”

Now that London resident Edwin Shuker has discovered his certificate from Baghdad’s Frank Iny School in the NARA exhibition, he would be extremely disappointed to see it go anywhere but into “a single collection in a safe and secure location freely accessible to the community and its future generations.”

“When I encountered my school certificate, with the picture of a 12-year-old boy, I felt as if I had stepped out of a time machine back into Baghdad in the dark period prior to our escape in 1971. I cried uncontrollably with the emotions of a frightened child unsure about the future,” Shuker tells the Report.

Shuker’s school certificate was discovered in one of the 27 large aluminum trunks filled with the artifacts that had been floating in four feet of water. After the items were removed

from the water, they were dried outside in the sun; but Baghdad’s humidity caused them to become moldy. NARA was consulted, and the decision was made to freeze the materials to prevent any further damage.

Somehow, a freezer truck was secured in the war zone.

According to Rhode, the initial stages of the salvage operation were made possible by a donation of \$15,000 from New York investment banker and philanthropist Harvey Krueger. Once the US government came on board, it allocated several million dollars through the State Department for the recovery and conservation of the materials. In addition, the Center for Jewish History obtained a \$98,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for the project.

“The water smelled horrid,” recalls Doris Hamburg, NARA’s director of preservation programs. She was brought to Baghdad by military transport to assess the damage and make recommendations on how to best preserve the books and documents.

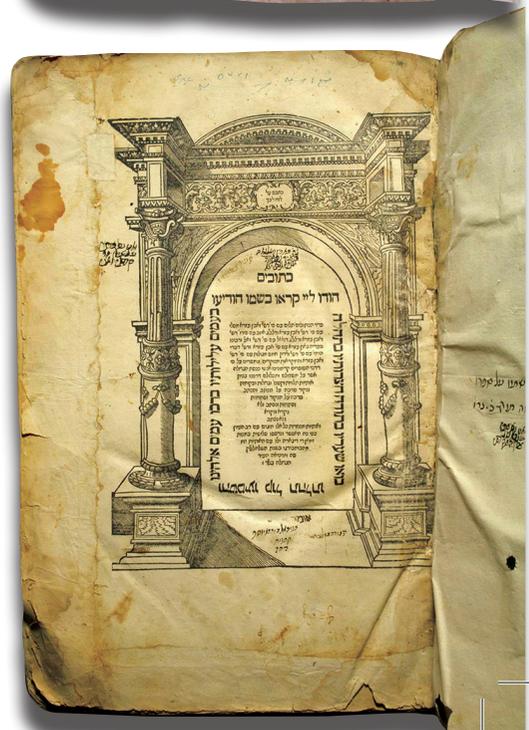
“We had to stop the clock,” Hamburg says about the decision to freeze the materials in the refrigerated truck. There were no options for vacuum freeze-drying in the region; so in August 2003, the trunks were transferred to a freeze-drying facility in Texas. Later, the materials were transferred to NARA’s College Park, Maryland, facilities for conservation and imaging. With funding coming in stages, the project took a full decade to complete.

According to Hamburg, all the items were stabilized for digitization. This included remediation for mold, repairs for handling and boxing for storage. The 24 artifacts that were chosen for the exhibition received full conservation treatment, including washing, new bindings and the filling in of missing paper as needed.

“The exhibition has surpassed our wildest expectations,” says NARA spokeswoman Miriam Kleiman, noting that there were 16,000 visitors to “Discovery and Recovery” in its first three weeks alone. “We thought it would have a narrow interest, but we have had more media interest in this than for any of our other temporary exhibitions,” she says.

Creating the exhibition posed new and interesting challenges for the NARA team.

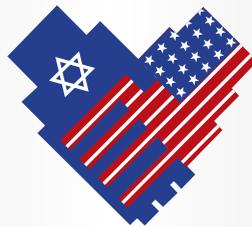
Most obviously, NARA rarely exhibits material that does not come from its collection of federal records. However, even more challenging was the fact that curators were putting together the exhibition as the IJA preservation work was just beginning.



What do you think?

Sanctions or Diplomacy

How can a nuclear Iran be stopped?
Come and be a part of the discourse on the future of Israel



THE JERUSALEM POST ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Elyakim

This not-to-be-missed annual event will this year include senior Israeli officials, newsmakers and opinion-shapers, discussing the key issues and challenges facing Israel and the Jewish world today



Avigdor Liberman
Minister of Foreign Affairs



Tzipi Livni
Minister of Justice



Uzi Landau
Minister of Tourism



Gilad Erdan
Minister of
Communications and
Home Front Defense



Nir Barkat
Mayor of Jerusalem



Ron Prosor
Israel's Ambassador
to the UN

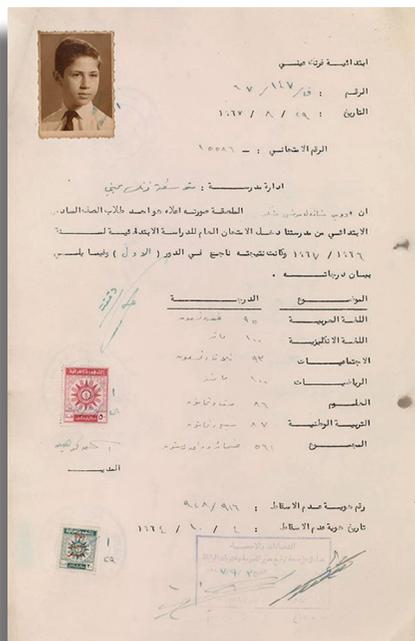
April 6, 2014
Marriott Marquis, New York City.

For additional details and registration, go to www.jpost.com
or call US toll free 1-888-576-7881
Other countries: 972-2-531-5439

* There may be slight changes with regards to VIP participants



Jewish World



Edwin Shuker's school certificate is one of the 24 items displayed at the IJA exhibition



Iraqi Jewish Archive conservator Katherine Kelly examines a book of writings with rabbinic commentary, printed in 1567

“There was a new discovery every time we turned around,” says Lisa Royse, the exhibition’s coordinating curator. “Some material came in late in the process, so it was exciting and challenging.”

Gabriel Goldstein, a consulting curator with 25 years of experience working with Jewish museums, agrees. “The selection process was more demanding. There was a vast amount of material,” he reflects. He is pleased with how he, Royse and the rest of the team, including an Arabic language specialist, were able to pull out a small number of items that provided a powerful sampling of the larger story of the collection, and of Iraqi Jewish history and culture from ancient times through to the 20th century.

In a first for a NARA-produced exhibition, its labels and text panels are in two languages – in this case, English and Arabic – with the latter language included on the assumption that the exhibition would be put on display after its return to Iraq.

JIMENA president Gina Waldman sees no reason for the IJA artifacts to go on display in Iraq, or to be returned there at all. “These things have no inherent value except to those to whom they belong,” she asserts. “We are absolutely grateful to NARA, but the Iraqi Jews are the rightful owners of

these materials.”

Carole Basri, a law professor who worked for the CPA in 2003-2004 and is the great-granddaughter of a former chief rabbi of Baghdad, doesn’t see how the Iraqi government even figures in to the agreement that was made regarding the IJA. “The agreement was between America and the CPA over stolen property,” she says.

She doesn’t think Iraq has any real interest in the material. “The IJA is minor compared to the amount of Jewish-related material that is in the Iraqi National Archive. And there is a precedent of the Iraqi government giving Torahs to the Iraqi Jewish community in London,” she contends.

In testimony given at a November 13 hearing of the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, there was a small hint that – at the very least – the IJA may not return to Iraq next summer, as originally scheduled.

“All I can say is that we have an agreement with the Iraqi ambassador here to begin a conversation about longer-term loans here in the United States to make sure that people

can view them. But that will be an ongoing course of discussion. It’s November now. We have until the end of next summer. So we do have some time to discuss this,” offered the Department of State’s deputy assistant secretary for Iraq and Iran, Brett McGurk. “We have heard very loudly and clearly the concerns from the community. We’ve listened to those. We’ve taken them to heart. And we’ll see what we can do.”

Stan Urman, JJAC executive director, is looking to the Department of State to do the right thing. “In our view, since the State Department undertook this agreement, it is within its purview to see that it is flawed and to renegotiate it,” he says.

He’s hoping the Iraqi Jewish community can rely on the US government, but he is prepared for anything to happen. “It would be ideal, but may not appear realistic, if the US and Iraq would come together and realize that the IJA should remain in Iraqi Jewish care,” Urman notes.

“Therefore, we need to pursue all options to ensure that the IJA is returned to its rightful Jewish owners.” ■