The Jewish *Mahallah* of Singapore as a Site of Transcultural Memory*

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Introduction

The *mahallah*, where most Singaporean Jews lived from settlement in the 1870s until the postcolonial period in the 1960s, is essential to the history of Jews in Singapore. The *mahallah* was always more than a physical site. It shaped the cultural, religious, and communal practices that characterized the Jews of Singapore. However, none of the still insubstantial research on Jews in Singapore has focused on the *mahallah*.[1] While there is some interdisciplinary research on *mahallah*s outside Singapore, relatively little of that research examines Jewish *mahallah*s.[2] This is due to the assumption that *mahallah*s

* My thanks to my mother, May Prosser, née Elias, for sharing her recollections, which serve as a significant source for this essay. I am also grateful to my cousin and writer Moshe Elias, and my cousin Michelle Elias, whose accounts, and correspondence with whom, have informed this essay greatly.

1 Research on Singapore Jews consists primarily of the following: Eze Nathan, *The History of Jews in Singapore, 1830–1945* (Singapore: Herbilu, 1986); Joan Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore* (Singapore: Suntree, 2007); Jonathan Goldstein, "The Jews of Singapore: A Community Founded on the Opium Trade," in *Jewish Communities in Modern Asia: Their Rise, Demise and Resurgence*, ed. Rotem Kowner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 145–162; Jonathan Goldstein, "Singapore, Manila and Harbin as Reference Points for Asian 'Port Jewish' Identity," *Jewish Culture and History* 7, no. 1–2 (2004): 271–290, https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169X.2004.10512023; Jonathan Goldstein, *Jewish Identities in East and Southeast Asia: Singapore, Manila, Taipei, Harbin, Shanghai, Rangoon, and Surabaya* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015); and Amos Wei Wang Lim, "Decolonization and Its Aftermath: The Fate of the Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora in British Asia," in *Jewish Communities in Modern Asia*, 186–204. A chapter on the *mahallah* appears in Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 65–73. This essay diverges from Bieder's chapter in terms of argument and my extensive use of oral histories, not only those of Jews but also those of non-Jewish interlocutors.

2 The most substantial study on *mahallah*s, focused on Turkey, is "De L'Empire ottoman à la Turquie actuelle: le quartier (*mahalle*). Approche des normes et des usages," *Anatolia Moderna Yeni Andalou* X (2004): 123–235, https://www.persee.fr/issue/anatm_1297-8094_2004_num_10_1. On Jewish *mahallah*s under the Ottoman Empire, see Daniel J. Schroeter, "Jewish Quarters in the Arab-Islamic Cities of the Ottoman Empire," in *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Avigdor Levy (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994), 287–300. On Jewish *mahallah*s in Central Asia, see Alanna E. Cooper, "When a Neighbourhood Falls off the Map: Jewish Disappearance from Samarkand's Post-Soviet Landscape," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 22, no. 3 (July 11, 2022): 347–370, https://doi.org/10.1080/14725886.2022.2090236; and Alanna E. Cooper, "Where Have All the Jews Gone? Mass Migration from Independent Uzbekistan," in *The Divergence of Judaism and Islam: Interdependence, Modernity, and Political Turmoil*, ed. Michael M. Laskier and Yaacov Lev (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 199–224. On Jewish quarters in the Islamic world, including *mahallah*s,

were Islamic spaces that pertained mostly to Ottoman or post-Ottoman territories. By focusing on the *mahallah* of Singapore, this essay highlights the Middle Eastern and transcultural origins of the word "*mahallah*" and the practices associated with it, which were brought to British Singapore by the Jews migrating from the Middle East. The Jewish *mahallah* challenged the British imperial racial divisions of space in Singapore, articulated in the Raffles Town Plan. Yet the *mahallah* disintegrated, as Singaporean Jews, even while belonging to the same ethnic origin and cultural and religious group, succumbed to identification with these divisions.

This essay relies primarily on oral history interviews. Oral histories are an optimum research source for this subject for the following reasons: First, the *mahallah* was not a site drawn up in urban planning or represented in any of the maps; second, it was an idea of a neighborhood produced in intimate relationship with the community; third, the *mahallah* as a concept and a place is intrinsically connected to memory; finally, early official records on the Jewish community of Singapore were lost during the Japanese occupation of Singapore during the Second World War.[3] Since the *mahallah* as a category is infused with the local, I have chosen to retain the participants' distinct vernacular English (Baghdadi Jewish and Singlish). The *mahallah* escaped official—in Singapore, British colonial—discourse. Instead, it is a product of communal transcultural memory. That is, it was transported to Singapore by Jewish immigrants from different Middle Eastern locales through memories of their lives before Singapore; it brought the Singaporean Jewish community together in a way that crossed the cultures of other communities in Singapore; and it was preserved by Singaporean Jewish community memories, in particular in the oral histories of the community.

The seventeen oral history interviews that I refer to in this paper were conducted between 1983 and 2019 under various projects managed by the Oral History Centre (formerly Oral History Unit) of the National Archives of Singapore.[4] Most of the interviewees were prominent and impactful figures in the fields of politics, law, or trade. They include David Marshall, the first elected Chief Minister of Singapore; Jacob Ballas, former chair of the Malaysia and Singapore Stock Exchange and a major philanthropist; Joseph (Joe) Grimberg, a former judge at the Singapore Supreme Court; Harry

see Emily Gottreich, "Jewish Quarters (Ḥāra, Mallāḥ, Maḥalla, Qāʿat al-Yahūd)," *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World Online* (Brill, 2010), accessed July 1, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1163/1878-9781_ejiw_COM_0012040. Other relevant works on *mahallah*s are cited below.

3 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, i.

4 Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, accessed June 30, 2023, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/. All quotations have been used with permission and should not be re-cited without further permission.

Elias, former president of the Law Society of Singapore; Frederick Isaacs, an eminent optician; and Savi J. Khafi, former president of the Singapore Diamond Bourse. These figures, along with the others whose interviews are discussed here (Charles Simon, Albert Lelah, David Saul, and Samuel Bernard Sassoon), were also leaders of the Jewish community. With the exception of one woman, who is interviewed along with her brother (Flossie Joseph and her brother Sion Elias), all the interviewees are men. That is to say that, while the oral histories are undoubtedly a rich resource for community history, it is important to note that the sources used here do not represent all the views and experiences of the *mahallah*: they do not represent women's experiences of the *mahallah*, or the lives of the less prominent in the Jewish community. Nevertheless, because of the importance of these oral histories for Singaporean Jewish memory and the fact that many of the interviewees played key roles in shaping the *mahallah* and Singapore's Jewish community, I am naming my sources in the body of this essay, and not merely in the footnotes.

I supplement the interviews with data that is at once personal and communal (history of the community, compiled by the community, and written by outsiders), and provides some of the otherwise underrepresented perspectives of Singapore *mahallah* life. I draw on the history of my family, one branch of the Eliases, based mainly on discussions with my mother over many years. The Elias family were longtime residents in the *mahallah*, from the time of my great-grandfather's arrival in Singapore from Iraq in the 1890s, via India, until my mother migrated from Singapore to England in 1961. I also include a novel written by a cousin who grew up in Singapore, Moshe Elias, which is set in the Singapore *mahallah*.[5] This is supplemented by personal correspondence both with this author and with my sole relative still living in Singapore, Michelle Elias. Additionally, I use histories of Singapore Jews, particularly the personal narrative written by the community's first historian, Eze Nathan.[6] I enlist the recent family memoir by Diana Saltoon, whose memories of growing up in the *mahallah* parallel not only these texts but also my own family's memories.[7] I draw on a British Jew's account of his visit to the community, which represents an outsider's view.[8] Finally, my research is based on my observations during ten trips to Singapore spaced over fifty-five years.

5 Moshe Elias, *The Messiahs of Princep Street* (Woodstock: Writersworld, 2014).

6 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore.*

7 Diana Saltoon, *My Sister Meda: A Memoir of Old Singapore* (Lulu.com, 2023). For her account of the *mahallah*, see especially 21–43.

8 Israel Cohen, *The Journal of a Jewish Traveller* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1925).

Trans-imperial subjects

Fig. 1. The Maghain Aboth Synagogue, Singapore, 2000. *Photograph by the author.*

The *mahallah* arrived in Singapore in the nineteenth century, transported by Jews from Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, principally via the Ottoman Empire. Despite the recent arrival, the *mahallah*, as a term and as an idea, had a prehistory, and this prehistory and the term's origins associated it with transcultural memory and trans-imperialism. The word is Arabic, meaning "encampment" (originally military) or "place to stop," and originated in the Middle East.[9] With the expansion of the Arabic and subsequently Mughal empires, places named and conceived as *mahallahs* spread throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. The term *mahallah*, therefore, arrived in South and Southeast Asia before the migration of Middle Eastern Jews, through the expansion of the Muslim empires. In Thailand, for example, *mahallah* designates the country's contemporary Muslim networks.[10] Simultaneous with

9 John Everett-Heath, "Al Maḥallah al Kubrá," *Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Place Names*, 6th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2020), accessed May 18, 2023, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191905636.001.0001/acref-9780191905636-e-9482.

10 Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Local Networks and Transnational Islam in Thailand (with Emphasis on the Southernmost Provinces)," in *Transnational Islam in South and Southeast Asia: Movements, Networks, and Conflict Dynamics*, ed. Peter Mandaville, Farish A. Noor, Alexander Horstmann, Dietrich Reetz, Ali Riaz, Animesh Roul, Noorhaidi Hasan, Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, Rommel C. Banlaoi, and Joseph C. Liow (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2009), 189–208.

its migration, the term changed its meaning from military camp to civilian neighborhood or quarter, and came to signify, in the sense most relevant to the Singapore Jewish *mahallah*, a "neighbourhood community."[11]

*Mahallah*s were key to the successful settlement and rule of the Ottoman Empire. Some historians have argued that the Ottoman Empire was distinctly transcultural in its formation, "a uniquely hybrid civilization" and an "institutional bricolage."[12] Spanning Europe and Asia, it was "a multi-ethnic and multinational trans-continental empire," whose hybridity was enabled by trade.[13] I would go as far to claim that *mahallah*s facilitated the multicultural and transcontinental form of this empire. Shaped around a religious group or ethnicity, the *mahallah* was "the effective unit of the Ottoman city."[14] It was "an administrative unit in which persons were made legally responsible for each other and for maintaining the peace."[15] But it also allowed the Ottoman Empire to expand its territory and to retain ultimate rule over different communities.

Jewish *mahallah*s came into existence throughout Ottoman territories.[16] As the Ottoman Empire dissolved or parts of it were conquered, some *mahallah*s, in the Balkans for example, were subsumed by other empires. This transformation that occurred in a single place was different from what happened with the Jews of Singapore, who had left one place for another. In this instance, Jews migrating from areas under Ottoman imperial control to territories under the British Empire brought the term with them. Singapore's case is not unique. For example, in India, the Jewish quarters in Bombay and Calcutta shared many characteristics with the *mahallah* that were imported from the Ottoman Empire into Singapore.[17] This is attested to by Baghdadi

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11 Paul Georg Geiss, "*Mahallah* and Kinship Relations: A Study on Residential Communal Commitment Structures in Central Asia of the 19th Century," *Central Asian Survey* 20, no. 1 (2001): 97–106; 98, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930120055488.

12 Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 7.

13 Gerard Delanty, "Civilizational Constellations and European Modernity Reconsidered," in *Europe and Asia Beyond East and West*, ed. Gerard Delanty (London: Routledge, 2006), 45–60; 57.

14 Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 126.

15 Rebecca Bryant, "Introduction: Everyday Coexistence in the Post-Ottoman Space," in *Post-Ottoman Coexistence: Sharing Space in the Shadow of Conflict*, ed. Rebecca Bryant (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 1–38; 33.

16 Stanford J. Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991). Shaw notes the existence of Jewish *mahallah*s under the Ottoman Empire in Istanbul, Sarajevo, Izmir, and throughout Egypt, Palestine, and Syria.

17 I use the earlier names for Mumbai and Kolkata respectively, since I am referring to the period before they were renamed.

Jewish family memoirs from Bombay and Calcutta.[18] However, memories of the term *mahallah* and its practices do not survive to the same degree in these cities, perhaps because there was no project to record the oral histories of the Jewish community in India comparable to that conducted by the Oral History Centre of the National Archives of Singapore.

Jewish presence was first recorded in Singapore in 1830, and Jewish settlers appear in a census conducted in 1833.[19] Most of these early immigrants, who continued arriving in Singapore up until the end of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920s, were mainly attracted by the opportunities offered by the British Empire. The persecution of Baghdadi Jews under Baghdad's Ottoman governor Dawud Pasha drove some Jewish families, most famously the Sassoons, to flee Baghdad for Bombay in the 1830s.[20] However, few Singapore Jewish oral histories record hardship or oppression under the Ottomans. Harry Elias's (no relation) reference to "disadvantages" for Jews under the Ottoman Empire is one exception.[21]

Opportunity for trade was the main draw for Jews immigrating from the Ottoman Empire to Singapore. According to Charles Simon, former President of the Jewish Welfare Board in Singapore, the first nine Jews recorded in Singapore in 1830 were spice traders.[22] Jews in Iraq were exposed to the possibilities of trade in the British Empire from the mid-eighteenth century,

18 For personal and familial memories of Baghdadi Jewish community life in Bombay, see Rachel Manasseh, *Baghdadian Jews of Bombay: Their Life and Achievements. A Personal and Historical Account* (Great Neck: Midrash Ben Ish Hai, 2013); for the same in Calcutta, see Jael Silliman, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope* (Calcutta, Seagull Books, 2001). Savi J. Khafi, a Jew from Singapore, recounts his sojourn among Bombay's Jewish community from 1949 to 1954, after his emigration from Afghanistan and before his immigration to Singapore. Savi J. Khafi interview by Daniel Chew, January 17, 1984, accession no. 000389, reel/disc 1, Communities of Singapore (Part 1), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000389.

19 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 1.

20 For accounts of this oft-told episode, see Cecil Roth, *The Sassoon Dynasty* (London: Robert Hale, 1941), 33–36; David Solomon Sassoon, *A History of the Jews in Baghdad* (Letchworth: Solomon D. Sassoon, 1949), 124–125; Stanley Jackson, *The Sassoons: Portrait of a Dynasty* (London: Heinemann, 1968), 7–13; Joseph Sassoon, *The Global Merchants: The Enterprise and Extravagance of the Sassoon Dynasty* (London: Penguin, 2021); and Manasseh, *Baghdadian Jews of Bombay*, 45–46.

21 Harry Elias, interview by Foo Kim Leng and Serene Wee, March 24, 2010, accession no. E000322, reel/disc 1, Development of Singapore's Legal System, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/E000322. The parents of Elias arrived from Baghdad with their parents at the end of the nineteenth century.

22 Charles Simon interview by Lim Chi Wen, September 28, 1987, accession no. 000395, reel/disc 15, Communities of Singapore (Part 1), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000395.

thanks to the East India Company's factory in Ottoman Basra.[23] The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 expedited shipping between the Middle East and British India, which in turn facilitated trade flow into Southeast Asia.[24] Sir Stamford Raffles, a clerk in the East India Company, acquired Singapore from its Malay rulers in 1819 as a trade entrepôt for the British. Raffles recognized the role of foreign merchants in generating British prosperity in Singapore.[25] In 1823, he passed a series of administrative regulations ensuring freedom of trade and "indulgent consideration for the prejudices of each tribe" in the port.[26] These protections, favorable to Jews and other immigrants, were extended by laws passed by the Colonial Office in London in 1875, which stated that "aliens had the equal rights with British subjects" concerning property.[27]

As Jonathan Goldstein's research shows, Singapore fulfilled the needs of "port Jews":[28] it was a city that valued trade, and a place in which Jews could attain social and civil acceptance while maintaining a collective solidarity that included non-religious bonds. The Baghdadi Jewish diaspora spread throughout Southeast Asia, in port cities such as Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon, Penang, Surabaya, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. As Ruth Fredman Cernea writes of Baghdadi Jews in Burma, Baghdadi Jewish settlements in port cities were "like points in a silken cobweb … distant, but never isolated."[29] Singapore Jews often had familial and/or trade connections across these ports and across empires. Frederick Isaacs, for example, who came to Singapore in 1926, was born in 1917 in Surabaya in the Dutch East Indies, where his father had an import-export business; Isaacs recounts that his father came from the border region of Turkey and Iraq, and his mother, from Baghdad.[30] His parents thus came from the Ottoman Empire and his

23 M. E. Yapp, "The Establishment of the East India Company Residency at Baghdād, 1798–1806," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 30, no. 2 (1967): 323–336, http://www.jstor.org/stable/610996.

24 C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819–1988* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), 83–84.

25 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, vi.

26 Cited in Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, 22.

27 Cited in Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 14.

28 Goldstein, "Singapore, Manila and Harbin."

29 Ruth Fredman Cernea, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), xv.

30 Frederick Jacob Isaacs interview by Daniel Chew, December 06, 1983, accession no. 000378, reel/disc 1, Communities of Singapore (Part 1), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000378.

father worked in the Dutch colonies, before the family moved to the British colony of Singapore. Not only did goods and people move across borders of empires and cultures, but also terms and practices associated with them, such as the *mahallah*.

The first Jews to settle in Singapore lived in the commercial district of Boat Quay. Their presence in this area remains visible in street names, such as Synagogue Street and Solomon Street.[31] Synagogue Street housed the community's first religious services in a house above a shop. By the 1870s, the number of Jews in Singapore had grown enough for the community to build a synagogue. The synagogue was completed in 1878 in Waterloo Street, a residential area of Singapore.[32] Its name, Maghain Aboth, "Shield of Fathers," encapsulates the importance of ancestral biblical and patriarchal memory for the Singapore Jewish community.[33] The new Jewish quarter, which was known as the *mahallah*, grew up around the synagogue. A new wave of Jewish immigrants included the working class and poor, adding to the merchants and traders who made up the first wave of migrants. The main streets of the *mahallah* were Short Street, Prinsep Street, Middle Road, Wilkie Road, Sophia Road, and Selegie Road. My mother's family lived on Short Street for over three generations, with only brief interruptions mainly around the time of the Second World War. Nathan states that the poorest homes were located in this area.[34] Corroboration of this point, with specific mention of Short Street, is provided by Isaacs, Simon, and Harry Elias.[35]

Short Street was considered "the heart of the *mahallah*,"[36] in part because the *mahallah* was inextricably associated with the working class and the poor. Most residents of this street were peddlers, shopkeepers, and clerks. According to Jacob Ballas, "Most of them were just struggling, most of them were [*sic*] buy some goods and sell it, middlemen, most of them didn't do well."[37] Ballas, who was born into poverty but became a successful businessman and left a

31 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 2–4.

32 Simon, interview, reel/disc 17, March 14, 1988.

33 "Maghain" (מָגֵן) and "Aboth" (אָבוֹת) appear in the Amidah, a core prayer in Judaism, which invokes a Jewish lineage back to the earliest biblical patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). On the Amidah prayer, see Rabbi Daniel Kohn, "The Amidah," *My Jewish Learning*, accessed 14 December 2024, https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-amidah/.

34 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 26.

35 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 3; Simon, interview, reel/disc 17; Elias, interview, reel/disc 1.

36 Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 69.

37 Jacob Ballas, interview by Daniel Chew, December 06, 1983, accession no. 000163, reel/disc 1, Communities of Singapore (Part 1), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000163.

legacy as a generous philanthropist, lived first in Wilkie Road and then on Short Street. Isaacs mentions how some poor Jews in the *mahallah* had small shops on Change Alley.[38] Before the Second World War, my maternal grandfather, Jacob Elias, and his family conducted their spice trading business, called the "Elias Brothers," in this area.

Poverty shaped families. Harry Elias speaks about how people survived times of hardship by pawning jewelry to buy food.[39] My grandfather did this repeatedly, buying the jewelry back, or purchasing more jewelry as an investment, when he had the money. Harry Elias lived with his family just off Serangoon Road. His parents arrived from Baghdad at the end of the nineteenth century. Like members of my family, they never owned a house of their own. Some families could not even afford the rent for rent-controlled apartments, which were introduced after the Second World War. This precarity, Elias states, was typical of *mahallah* Jews.[40]

Inhabitants of the area recall the atmosphere and architecture of the place. The houses resembled the cramped rented residences of the working classes in urban Britain, rather than Ottoman or Iraqi styles. Perhaps due to the Iraqi or Asian influence, they had verandas, and sometimes courtyards or small gardens. David Saul, who arrived in Singapore from Burma in 1908 with his Iraq-born parents, recalls houses built of wood dug directly into the earth. He contrasts the warm, organic feel of wooden planks and roofs, which were easy to keep clean, with the cold, inanimate effect of cement used for houses constructed later.[41] Simon recalls that the two-story terraced houses constructed a few decades later were sparsely furnished with often broken utilitarian furniture.[42] Each floor had a couple of rooms, comprising a sitting-cum-dining room and a kitchen downstairs and a couple of bedrooms upstairs. Harry Elias comments that the houses tended to be overcrowded.[43]

Ballas, who arrived from Iraq with his parents in the late 1920s, describes how his mother supported the family by baking bread in their house after his father's textile trading business went bust, and how he would help sell it to

38 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 3.

39 Elias, interview, reel/disc 1.

40 Elias, interview, reel/disc 1.

41 David Saul, interview by Pitt Kuan Wah, December 12, 1983, accession no. 000380, reel/disc 2, Communities of Singapore (Part 1), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000380.

42 Simon, interview, reel/disc 17.

43 Elias, interview, reel/disc 1.

the community as a boy.[44] Many of the homes doubled as shops, like that first religious communal space in Synagogue Street. David Marshall, who later became the Chief Minister of Singapore and helped steer the colony toward independence, was born in a shop-house.[45] As Moshe Elias writes in his novel on the *mahallah*, "shop-down house-up, and narrow houses up-and down, the kind of place most of us lived in, in those days, not counting Europeans."[46] The novel emphasizes the tightness of space. The protagonist walks up and down the street where he lives, called Princep Street according to the title of the novel (a fictionalized version of Prinsep Street), "looking into the shops and houses wondering why they were so narrow. You could stand against one wall and spit across to the other, all except the end one, the coffee shop, twice as big."[47]

The Maghain Aboth Synagogue contains a mix of Eastern and Western features. It incorporates neoclassical Roman arches,[48] and its straight columns and unadorned simplicity recall the Great Synagogue of Baghdad.[49] The *bimah* (raised platform for reading from the Torah) is in the center of the prayer hall in Sephardi or Mizrahi style (see Fig.1), rather than at the front, as is the case in many Ashkenazi synagogues. Importantly, all the streets in the *mahallah* are within walking distance of the synagogue. This central placement mimics the structure of the *mahallah* in the Ottoman Empire, which was based on the *millet*, the system of organizing a community along the lines of religious denominations.[50] The ability to walk to the synagogue was essential for the mostly observant Jewish community of Singapore, if they were not to break the Shabbat prohibition on travel. Simon's recollection that "life actually revolved around the synagogue" explains the symbolic and physical centrality of the Maghain Aboth to the *mahallah*'s communal life.[51]

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44 Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

45 David Saul Marshall, interview by Lily Tan, September 24, 1984, accession no. 000156, reel/disc 1, Political History of Singapore 1945–1965, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000156.

46 Elias, *Messiahs of Princep Street*, 11.

47 Elias, *Messiahs of Princep Street*, 52.

48 "Maghain Aboth Synagogue," Places of Worship, Roots, Singapore Government Agency, accessed July 3, 2023, https://www.roots.gov.sg/en/places/places-landing/Places/national-monuments/maghain-aboth-synagogue.

49 No longer in existence, the Great Synagogue of Baghdad has been recreated on a smaller scale in the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre in Or Yehuda, Israel.

50 Bruce Masters, "Millet," in *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Masters (New York: Infobase, 2009), 383–384.

51 Charles Simon, interview, reel/disc 19, November 19, 1987.

Mahallah mentality

Fig. 2. Baking Arabic flatbread in the Maghain Aboth.
Photograph courtesy of the Jewish Welfare Board, Singapore.

The *mahallah* was a way of life shaped by certain cultural practices. Writing on Jewish and non-Jewish communities in Ottoman Iraq, Hanna Batatu introduces the concept of a "*mahallah* mentality."[52] Her phrase encapsulates how residents of a *mahallah* "existed in a world of their own," without assimilating into a larger political structure.[53] This mentality was dominated by a sense of belonging to a neighborhood, which extended the concept of the home to include public spaces like streets and coffee shops. This "*mahallah* mentality" was also transported to Singapore. As Isaacs recalls, "If you were lonely, people would go round and meet up with neighbors, coffee shops, chit chatting for hours, talking all kinds of rubbish—this is what people would

52 Hanna Batatu, "Of the Diversity of Iraqis, the Incohesiveness of their Society, and their Progress in the Monarchic Period toward a Consolidated Political Structure," in *The Modern Middle East: A Reader*, ed. Albert Hourani, Philip S. Khoury, and Mary C. Wilson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 508.

53 Batatu, "Diversity of Iraqis," 507.

do if they felt lonely."[54] This is supported by Harry Elias: "At any given day you will find in the street ten or fifteen of us, getting out of our house and meeting on the street, as if it were our kingdom so to speak."[55] Ballas uses a metaphor for *mahallah* intimacy: "We were very, very, shall we say, knitted together."[56] Moshe Elias's novel uses a similar image when describing how the protagonist's father rarely ventured beyond the *mahallah.* He "pulled around him like a security blanket the dozen or so streets he slowly walked. … All he wanted was to feel at home because, where Jews were, he knew where he was and that gave him a good feeling."[57] These reflections demonstrate the way that the *mahallah* provided intimacy, warmth, and security—a sense of home—for its Jewish residents. The threads that constitute the blanket of the *mahallah* were the cultural practices that Singaporean Jews imported from their Middle Eastern, Ottoman, and in particular, Iraqi pasts.

Singaporean Jews continued their imported practices, despite the fact that Singapore was part of the British Empire. By continuing these practices—including language, dress, religiosity, and food—they resisted assimilation into the larger political structure.

For generations, at least until the interwar period (and for some of those born later), the common language in the streets was Arabic, rather than English. Isaacs called Arabic the "mother tongue."[58] Sion Elias's and Flossie Joseph's parents arrived as children in Singapore in the 1860s or 1870s from Iraq via Bombay, but they spoke to their Singapore-born children in Arabic. Elias and Joseph recall a rich lexicon of Arabic words and phrases, particularly for food and curses.[59] Scholars underestimate the range of languages that Singaporean Jews could speak. Goldstein writes that Baghdadi Jews came with Arabic and "learned English but not Chinese" in Singapore.[60] His statement conveys a misunderstanding of the diversity of Chinese dialects and a simplification of the linguistic diversity of Singapore. Joan Bieder records that inhabitants of the *mahallah* in Singapore spoke basic Malay for business purposes.[61] The personal stories reveal that a richer array of languages was spoken and that

54 Frederick Jacob Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 1.

55 Elias, interview, reel/disc 1.

56 Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

57 Elias, *Messiahs of Princep Street*, 10.

58 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 1.

59 Sion Elias and Flossie Joseph, interview by Denyse Tessensohn, March 13, 2002, accession no. 002338, reel/disc 4, Prisoners-of-War (POWs), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/002338.

60 Goldstein, "Singapore, Manila and Harbin," 273.

61 Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 41.

there was more ambiguity than what is implied by both of these views. The Singaporean Jews who, like my family, sojourned in India, spoke Hindustani. For Elias and Joseph, Hindustani was their parents' "secret language against us."[62] Malay could also have been spoken domestically, as well as for business purposes. My mother and her Jewish neighbors were multilingual from childhood, speaking not only these languages, but also, among the Chinese languages or dialects, Cantonese and/or Hokkien. My mother learned some Hokkien from her China-born mother and Joseph (Joe) Grimberg learned Cantonese from his family's Chinese maid.[63]

Inability to speak the local languages was an obstacle to settling in Singapore. Language skills determined the life choices of Albert Lelah's parents. His father spoke only Arabic and never learned to speak English or Malay or to read Hebrew. Many in the *mahallah* may have been able to recite Hebrew in liturgical contexts, but they could not speak it and did not understand it. Lelah's father went back to Baghdad frustrated. Lelah's mother remained in Singapore with the rest of her family, as she learned a local language, Malay, by shopping in the market and pointing at what she needed. As Lelah remembers:

> Actually, my mother, she has very nice nature. She never loses her temper, and she makes friends very quick. She smiles all the time. Even though she cannot speak … she used to smile. Very friendly, she used to mix with people down here. And people, they used to sympathize with her.[64]

Arab influence extended beyond language, across Singaporean Jewish culture, long after migration. This is evident in Ballas's statement from 1983, sixty years after his family left Iraq:

> We are more Arabic, shall we say. We eat our food, which is like the Arabs. We are more like the Middle East Jews. This is why there's a big difference between us and the European Jews. … We are more Arabs than Europeans, we are more Asians than Europeans.[65]

62 Elias and Joseph, interview, reel/disc 4.

63 Joseph Grimberg interview by Wee Serene and Foo Kim Leng, February 23, 2010, accession no. E000049, reel/disc 1, Development of Singapore's Legal System, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/E000049.

64 Albert Abraham Lelah, interview by Daniel Chew, July 15, 1983, accession no. 000296, reel/disc 3, Communities of Singapore (Part 1), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000296.

65 Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

Among the earliest generations, names followed the Arabic pronunciations. That is, "Aaron" was pronounced and transliterated as "Haron," and "Farha" was not yet anglicized to "Flora," as is evident from the names of my great-uncle Haron and great-aunt Farha, both born at the end of the nineteenth century. Marshall's family was named "Mashal" until 1920, when a "florid English doctor with a monocle to his eye" complained he could not "pronounce this outlandish name," and advised Marshall's "poor humble father" to "put a 'r' in it."[66]

The common style of dress among Singaporean Jews was initially the same as that worn in Iraq; women wore an Iraqi *ruppa* (dress) and the men wore robes and a turban or a fez, the symbol of the Ottoman Empire. Lelah, who emigrated from Baghdad to Singapore with his parents in 1920, recalls a rich array of terms for Arab-influenced attire. Men wore *yamani* (shoes of goat skin), *dishdasha* (robes), *zaboon* (a robe similar to a dressing gown), *abaya* (a light coat), and *shiphar* (a string of prayer beads). Women wore *izar*, which Lelah described as "like two sarongs. One goes inside and the other one she pulls it up to the head to cover the head."[67] Lelah's use of the Malay sarong to explain the Arab-influenced attire of women highlights the hybrid culture of Singapore Jews. Lelah also uses the Arabic terms *halal* and *haram* for what was acceptable in Singapore Jewish culture and what was not—instead of the Hebrew *halachic* terms of *kosher* and *treifah*—therefore underlining the persistence of Arab-influenced cultural memory among Singapore's Jews.[68]

The prayer service at the synagogue, its rhythmic, melodic, and stylistic features, is thought even until very recently to have maintained the Babylonian liturgical tradition from 2500 years ago, and Singaporean Jews are proud of this continuity.[69] The label "orthodox," which appears in scholarship on this community,[70] is a misnomer since this term emerges in an Ashkenazi context only in the nineteenth century, in reaction to reform movements. The community in Singapore was characterized not only by its attempt to keep Babylonian traditions alive but also by its openness. Harry Elias speaks of variation in Shabbat observance and emphasizes that there was no stigma attached to those who did not observe Shabbat.[71] Variation in religious

66 Marshall, interview, reel/disc 1.

67 Lelah, interview, reel/disc 2, July 15, 1983.

68 Lelah, interview, reel/disc 2.

69 Margaret J. Kartomi, "Singapore, a South-East Asian Haven: The Sephardi-Singaporean Liturgical Music of its Jewish Community, 1841 to the Present," *Musicology Australia* 22, no. 1 (1999): 3–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/08145857.1999.10416560.

70 Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*; and Goldstein, *Jewish Identities*.

71 Elias, interview, reel/disc 1.

observance in the community also included whether or how kosher was kept (for example, by not eating pork but consuming shellfish, as in my own and Grimberg's families),[72] whether a *bar mitzvah* (religious initiation ceremony) was undergone, and the extent of knowledge of Hebrew. Isaacs, who never had a *bar mitzvah*, went to Talmud Torah (Hebrew religious school) for one day, decided that it was not for him, and never returned.[73] Ballas recalls how in the Maghain Aboth on *Yom Kippur*:

> The atmosphere was very good. A lot of shouting and lot of talking. We prayed in Hebrew, we didn't understand, and because you didn't understand, you read part of it and after that, started talking with your neighbor and everybody. And, with the gossips and the meeting, you don't have to rush around and try to earn a living.[74]

Until the Second World War, there were no membership fees for the Maghain Aboth, and the upkeep of the synagogue was funded through the practice of auctioning *aliyot*, that is, taking bids for choosing those who would be called up to read in the synagogue.[75] Singapore Jews also continued non-liturgical cultural practices, some based on faith or superstition directly brought from Iraq. These included protecting babies from the evil eye, feeding snakes with milk to placate them, fortune-telling through the reading of coffee grains, and at celebratory occasions such as weddings, throwing *shasha* (a kind of Arabic homemade sweet treat), melon skins, and pistachio shells, and ululating "killi-llii-li" in a high pitch.[76]

The food in the *mahallah* homes was also Middle Eastern—"we brought it with us from Iraq," as Harry Elias puts it.[77] Lelah speaks of *arak*, an alcoholic beverage made from dates, *kubbah* or stuffed vegetables, pickles, and a lot

72 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 1.

73 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 1.

74 Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

75 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 37.

76 For reference to the evil eye, see Elias, *Messiahs of Princep Street*, 24. My mother's Baghdad-born grandmother continued to feed snakes milk when she arrived in Singapore. For more information on this superstitious practice prevalent among women in Baghdad, see Nissim Rejwan, *The Last Jews in Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 6. My mother remembers that she had her fortune told through coffee readings; see also the character of a coffee-reading fortune-teller (to whom Jews in the *mahallah* used to go) that was based on a historical figure, in Elias, *Messiahs of Princep Street,* 356. My mother also remembers *shasha* and the ululation; the prevalence of these practices is also confirmed by Elias and Joseph in their interview and Saltoon. See Elias and Joseph, interview, reel/disc 4 and Saltoon, *My Sister Meda*, 156.

77 Elias, interview, reel/disc 1.

of goat cheese.[78] The Maghain Aboth was pivotal in maintaining *mahallah* traditions, also in terms of food. Chickens were slaughtered by a *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) in the synagogue grounds and families could buy them there.[79] Before a festival, a sheep would be slaughtered there.[80] I remember that while visiting Singapore in even as late as the 1970s, the meals served from the kitchens of the synagogue after the service were Iraqi Jewish preparations. The main dish, called *hameem* (Arabic for "hot"), was spiced chicken stuffed with *pilao* rice, which was prepared on the Friday night before Shabbat and was slow-cooked overnight. This was originally done by placing the dish on a fire covered with sacks.[81] An Arabic flatbread, which my mother remembers by the name *roti*, was also baked in the kitchens of the Maghain Aboth (see Fig. 2). Thirty years older than my mother, Nathan remembers in more detail the bread that was baked in a house on Prinsep Street, whose name itself alluded to its Ottoman provenance: "I can still smell the *roti Istambul*, the crisp, flat, round baked bread for the *Shabbat* by *Itzhak Habaz* (Isaac the baker)."[82] The name of this bread is shortened to "*shatamboul*" in Moshe Elias's novel on Prinsep Street, although here, the baker is called Mohammed, and thus is likely a Muslim baker catering to Jews and other communities in Singapore.[83] Jael Silliman records her family and others in Calcutta's Baghdadi Jewish community as eating almost identical food items in her historical work on her family and community, which also involved her mother's oral historical narratives.[84] These food items originated in the *mahallah*s of the Middle East, although, like the *pilao* rice stuffed inside the chicken, they often picked up slightly different names or ingredients in the course of their migration to these new settlements.

However, the Singapore *mahallah* was not a culturally enclosed space, nor was Jewish life restricted to it. This was the case even in terms of the education received by the children. While the Talmud Torah and successive Jewish youth clubs (such as the Myrtle and the Menorah) were located in the *mahallah*, most children's education occurred in British institutions elsewhere in the city, in Catholic establishments such as Saint Joseph's Institution, or in Church of England establishments such as Saint Andrew's. My mother was educated at Saint Anthony's Convent, which was located within the *mahallah*. At school,

78 Lelah, interview, reel/disc 2.

79 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 1.

80 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 1; Elias, interview, reel/disc 1.

81 Elias, interview, reel/disc 1.

82 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 26.

83 Elias, *Messiahs of Princep Street*, 86.

84 Silliman, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames*, 101.

the children were exposed to non-Jewish faiths and traditions and learned to mix with different communities. Harry Elias values his experience of being invited to the non-Jewish homes of his classmates in Saint Andrew's:

> Here you get new exposure. … I grew up in St. Andrew's learning that my life was actually two—life of a Jew as a Jew, and life as Singaporean, not as a Jew. … And for that, I was very grateful and I'm still very grateful. Tonight, I'll be a Jew. Tomorrow, I'll go to your home. It makes no difference to me. … School allowed that mix.[85]

The *mahallah* also held nodes to other communities in the form of non-Jewish mobile hawkers, as well as the *kopitiams* (Malay or Chinese coffee shops) in the neighborhood, and the stalls set up by the hawkers (often selling food) on the streets, especially at night, which were run by people from other communities—Chinese, Indian, or Malay. Lelah speaks of these hawkers from his memories of the 1930s.[86] I remember their presence in the *mahallah* even in the 1970s, a decade after the Singapore government had begun legally restricting them.[87] Places for buying fruits, vegetables, fish, and staples such as rice and spices lay just on the borders of the *mahallah*, in Tekka Pasar (*pasar* is Malay for "market") and Little India. The *mahallah* was a Baghdadi Jewish space, but porous. Although the neighborhood included Jews from parts of the Ottoman Empire other than Baghdad and Basra in Iraq—such as from Aleppo, Yemen, Kurdistan, and Tunisia—all the Jews in diasporic *mahallah*s were nevertheless identified as "Baghdadis."[88] This indicates the continued centrality of Baghdad in defining Jewishness in the diaspora and applies as much to Jews in Singapore as to those in Burma and India. Baghdadi Jews were thus, as Nathan Katz argues in his book on Jews in India, "multicultural from the start."[89] I am suggesting that they were this and more. In transporting their *mahallah* practices into new cultures and empires and fusing them with local cultural traditions, Baghdadi Jews were transcultural.

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85 Elias, interview, reel/disc 2, March 24, 2010.

86 Lelah, interview, reel/disc 3, July 15, 1983.

87 "The History and Evolution of Singapore's Hawker Culture," Sites and Spaces, Roots, Singapore Government Agency, accessed June 30, 2023, https://www.roots.gov.sg/en/stories-landing/stories/Serving-Up-a-Legacy.

88 Tamar Marge Gubbay, Joan G. Roland, and Jael Silliman, "Baghdadi Jewish Women in India," The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women, Jewish Women's Archive, last modified May 16, 2022, accessed June 20, 2023, http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/baghdadi-jewish-women-in-india. Joan G. Roland states that in Bombay, "the term *Baghdadi* was most common for all these groups." Joan G. Roland, *Jews in British India: Identity in a Colonial Era* (London: University Press of New England, 1989), 15. See also Cernea, *Almost Englishmen*, xvii.

89 Nathan Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India*? (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 133.

Non-Jews lived in the Singapore *mahallah,* and this was characteristic of Jewish *mahallah*s elsewhere as well. Lelah remembers Indian, Malay, and Chinese neighbors—different cultural groups in proximity—the same as he had experienced with Muslims in Baghdad: "There is no difference," he says.[90] It is not clear whether he is referring to the similarity between Singapore and Baghdad, or to there being no divide between Jews and non-Jews in either of these places. The claim regarding the lack of distinction is appropriate of Singapore. My mother grew up playing with her neighbors' children, among whom were Eurasians, Chinese, as well as Malays, and Indians. Marshall had a similar experience.[91] In the *Messiahs of Princep Street*, Moshe Elias depicts the relationship between the protagonist's Jewish family and their Chinese and Indian neighbors. Living next door to each other connects their life stories, proximate plots in both senses.[92]

In keeping with Jewish *mahallah*s elsewhere, the Singapore *mahallah*, although it included non-Jews, was nevertheless perceived by Jews and non-Jews alike as a largely Jewish neighborhood. Sangarapillai Sivapathasundaram, a Tamil who migrated to Singapore in 1937 from Ceylon and lived in the *mahallah* in the pre-Second World War days, was aware of the Jewish community surrounding him and was struck by their strong community spirit.[93] Rajabali Jumabhoy, who arrived in Singapore in 1916 from Tamil Nadu, India, and who was a resident of the *mahallah* in the 1920s, also witnessed this strong sense of connection among the Jews.[94] George Cheng Guan Tan, an ethnic Chinese who was born in Singapore in 1938 and lived immediately next door to the Maghain Aboth with his family, recalls hearing the morning services with the Jewish men at prayer. He understood how Jews living in proximity to the synagogue and to each other strengthened the community, even while, as he points out, they mixed with the other ethnicities, including the Chinese, such as his own family.[95]

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90 Lelah, interview, reel/disc 2.

91 Marshall, interview, reel/disc 1.

92 Elias, *Messiahs of Princep Street.*

93 Sangarapillai Sivapathasundaram, interview by Rajandran Supramaniam, December 11, 1991, accession no. 001339, reel/disc 6, Communities of Singapore (Part 2), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/001339.

94 Rajabali Jumabhoy, interview by Lim How Seng, August 17, 1981, accession no. 000074, reel/disc 25, Pioneers of Singapore, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000074.

95 George Cheng Guan Tan, interview by Jesley Chua Chee Huan, September 20, 2001, accession no. 002545, reel/disc 13, Special Project, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/002545.

Chye Yam Heng, whose grandfather arrived from Swatow, China, grew up in the late 1950s and early 1960s on Short Street and Prinsep Street. He speaks of the substantial presence of the Jewish community on Short Street, and also mentions the street's Indian residents. He remembers his Jewish neighbors celebrating Jewish festivals such as *Sukkot* and arranging for Indians to weave leaves for the *Sukkot* booths that the Jews were expected to set up outside as part of the festival.[96] Krishna Pillay Bhaskar, a Malayali who came to Singapore in 1952 from Kerala in India and moved into Bencoolen Street, experienced his neighborhood as a Jewish area, which shared a porous border with the Indian community.[97]

The oral histories highlight the importance of making social connections outside of the Jewish community for the Jewish residents, and of mixing with non-Jews.[98] Some *mahallah* Jews became more engaged outside than within the Jewish community, such as Ballas, who was initially "more engrossed" with his Chinese friends and left the community during his youth, returning only during the exigencies experienced by the community in the Second World War.[99] Such intimacy of Jews with non-Jews led some interviewees (of the Oral History project) to underline the non-exceptionality of Jews in Singapore. For example, Isaacs states that there was "nothing special about the Jewish nationality [*sic*] in Singapore," and that they were no different from the Malays, Chinese, and Arabs, with whom they mingled.[100]

The *mahallah* not only enabled intercommunal relationships but sometimes also such families. For the families that could afford them, non-Jewish servants, maids, or cooks could be marginal but influential figures within a family. The hierarchical relationship of master and servant that Grimberg had as a child with his Chinese maid troubles him later in his life.[101] This gap could be crossed, however. My Chinese grandmother began her relationship with my grandfather while she was his housekeeper. She was converted to Judaism by Rabbi Jacob Shababo, who had been brought by Marshall from Egypt to serve the Singapore *mahallah*, and who subsequently converted a number of such Chinese female

96 Chye Yam Heng, interview by Patricia Lee, May 15, 2017, accession no. 004127, reel/disc 2, Special Project, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004127.

97 Krishna Pillay Bhaskar, interview by Ghalpanah Thangaraju, October 04, 2001, accession no. 002568, reel/disc 8, Performing Arts in Singapore (Dance), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/002568.

98 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 1; Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 1.

99 Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

100 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 10.

101 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 1.

partners of Jewish men in Singapore.[102] Samuel Bernard Sassoon's mother was also a Chinese immigrant, who converted to Judaism when she married Sassoon's father, an Iraqi Jewish immigrant from Basra.[103] Elias and Joseph also recall that a number of Jewish men married Chinese women.[104]

Opposing views on intermarriage can be found in the oral history narratives. Grimberg and Isaacs speak about Singapore Jews' inclination to "marry in" (that is, marry fellow Jews), suggesting that the conversion of non-Jews to Judaism was discouraged.[105] But Saul states:

> Yes, we can get married with the Chinese girl. Intermarriage, we call it. It is allowed. But I can tell you, first and foremost, the man will ask the Chinese girl, of course they are lover, both of them, "Would you like to follow our religion … our custom … our tradition?" She said, "Yes, I'll follow you." Then they call her in the name … of our previous ancestors. Like a girl … European girl.[106]

Indeed, Saul suggests that Jewish life in Singapore was enabled by coexistence and exchange with other communities: "The Chinese … worked hard. Even, amongst other nations, they have taught us what and what to eat. They planted accordingly to that they know, and we learnt from the Chinese."[107] Sassoon's sister, like their father, "married out," to a Chinese Singaporean. She moved to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, but she raised her children as Jewish, celebrating festivals even without a Jewish community around them.[108] "Marrying out," in other words, did not predetermine assimilation.

Did the mobile, transcultural origins of the *mahallah* facilitate the porous, transcultural character of the Singapore Jewish *mahallah*? Deploying research on *mahallah*s in other contexts suggests that this question should be answered in the affirmative. In a post-Ottoman context in Turkey, *mahallah*s are certainly thought to have encouraged "coexistence," and a form of "neighborliness."[109] As Cem Behar writes in his study of the *mahallah* in post-Ottoman Turkey, "The

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102 Bieder devotes a page to Rabbi Jacob Shababo. Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 117.

103 Samuel Bernard Sassoon, interview by Denyse Tessensohn, December 30, 2019, accession no. 004502, reel/disc 1, Communities of Singapore (Part 1), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004502.

104 Elias and Joseph, interview, reel/disc 3, March 13, 2002.

105 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 4; Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 10.

106 Saul, interview, reel/disc 2.

107 Saul, interview, reel/disc 2.

108 Sassoon, interview, reel/disc 1.

109 Bryant, "Everyday Coexistence," 32.

demarcation lines between *mahalle*s were never so strict and the horizontal mobility of the residents was much higher than is usually admitted. At the local level, mobility and change seem to have been the rule, not the exception."[110] Behar also indicates that the imaginary component of the *mahallah* was crucial to this breaking down of boundaries. The commonality or difference between people living in a singular *mahallah* could be "real or imagined."[111]

I would thus argue that the *mahallah* of Singapore was an "imagined community," to use Benedict Anderson's phrase for the imagined and symbolic investment which constitutes community belonging.[112] Indeed, Anderson's phrase has been applied to the Baghdadi Jewish community in Calcutta in Silliman's writing on her own family.[113] The fact that the *mahallah* of Singapore was also an "imagined community" makes it no less real. Yet, as I show in the next section, the *mahallah* never appeared physically on British or other maps.

The Raffles Town Plan

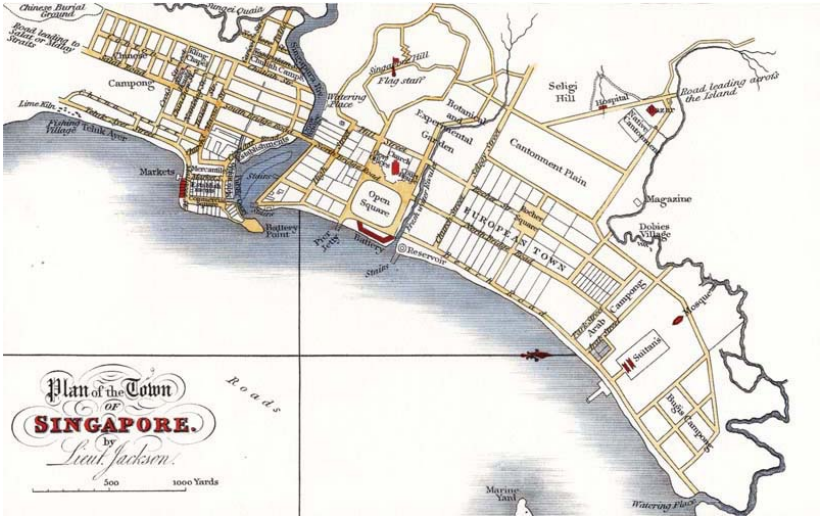

Fig. 3. *Lt. Philip Jackson,* Plan of the Town of Singapore (1822). *London: J & C Walker. Also known as the Raffles Town Plan.*

110 Cem Behar, *A Neighborhood in Ottoman Istanbul: Fruit Vendors and Civil Servants in the Kasap Ilyas Mahalle* (Albany, NJ: SUNY Press, 2003), 9.

111 Behar, *A Neighborhood in Ottoman Istanbul*, 17.

112 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

113 Silliman, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames*, 50.

The Jewish *mahallah*s or quarters existed only in places where the Jews comprised a minority. There was no Jewish quarter in cities where Jews were the majority. For example, in Thessaloniki, where Jews constituted the majority during most of the period of the Ottoman Empire from the sixteenth century until the 1920s, there was no single Jewish quarter but rather many areas in which the Jews settled.[114] Yet, while it was still a Jewish quarter, the *mahallah* was distinct from its European counterpart, the ghetto. Unlike ghettos, *mahallahs* were not walled in; residence within them was voluntary, and thus not driven by antisemitism or other prejudice, and the space was culturally porous.[115]

The *mahallah* in Singapore was also distinct from how the British organized, named, and conceived of this area. The words "*mahallah*" or *Jewish quarter* appear nowhere on British colonial maps, nor could I find mentions of these in British documents or accounts. In 1822, with the aim of establishing order in the colony, Raffles commissioned landscape engineer Lieutenant Philip Jackson to devise what came to be known as the Jackson Plan or Raffles Town Plan (see Fig. 3).[116] Using the river as a racial boundary, the plan imposed a grid system on the city, which divided resident ethnic groups into distinct areas: European Town for the British and other Westerners, Chinese Kampong (*kampong* being a Malay word meaning "village") for the Chinese, Kulia Kampong for Indians, Arab town for the Arabs, and Bugis for Malays. As Carl H. Nightingale has argued, Raffles "made urban segregation into a sort of political philosophy" in Singapore, implementing the British Empire's policy of divide and rule by minimizing "the 'mutual intercourse' of different groups."[117] In particular, the plan sought to control foreign merchant

114 Bea Lewkowicz, *The Jewish Community of Salonika: History, Memory, Identity* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006), 93.

115 The contrast between the *mahallah* and the ghetto is suggested in the following: Cooper, "When a Neighbourhood Falls," 348; Schroeter, "Jewish Quarters in the Arab-Islamic Cities," 291; Shaw, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 49; Jacob Barnai, "On the History of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire," in *Sephardi Jews in the Ottoman Empire*: *Aspects of Material Culture***,** ed. Esther Juhasz (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1990), 18–35; 32. For the contrast between the ghetto and minority quarters in the Mediterranean, see Susan Gilson Miller, "An Introduction to the Mediterranean Minority Quarter," in *The Architecture and Memory of the Minority Quarter in the Muslim Mediterranean City*, ed. Susan Gilson Miller and Mauro Bertagnin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 11–33, and for that between the ghetto and the *mellah*s (the Moroccan equivalent of the *mahallah*s), see Emily Gottreich, *The Mellah of Marrakesh: Jewish and Muslim Space in Morocco's Red City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

116 Bonny Tan, "Raffles Town Plan (Jackson Plan)," *Singapore Infopedia,* National Library Board, Singapore Government Agency, accessed July 3, 2023, https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=ed0c1981-882f-42c2-9acf-e5dae577a3ba.

117 Carl H. Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 139–140. Silliman describes a similar segregation in Calcutta, where her Jewish family lived in "Grey town," a cosmopolitan area between White town and Black town. See Silliman, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames*, 28.

communities, such as the Baghdadi Jews. The symmetry of the plan was already anachronistic in the contemporaneous layout of the city, and some details of the plan never materialized.[118] Yet the principles of ethnic division were implemented to organize the city, and they can still be seen in the character of some neighborhoods in Singapore today.

However, as Brenda Yeoh has argued in relation to colonial Singapore, indigenous and non-European immigrant communities contested the colonial racial organization, both at the level of discourse and social practice.[119] Although the Baghdadi Jews could be said to hail from Arab lands, the *mahallah* in Singapore straddled the ethnically separate areas of the Raffles Town Plan. It ran across the west of European Town into Arab Town and overlapped with Little India. The *mahallah* was thus in excess of British divide-and-rule colonial topography, not only in its cultural practices and memories, but also topographically, in the inhabitants' actual and cognitive map of home and belonging. The fact that the *mahallah* transgressed the divides of the city, and that it was neither imposed by the government nor officially mapped, underlines the point that Behar makes about the *mahallah* in Ottoman Istanbul: "The *mahalle* is in the eye of the inhabitant. … If anything, the 'borders' were organic, changeable, and mental."[120]

The streets in the *mahallah* drew their names from a British imperial register. They were named after key designers and builders, other colonized areas, or topographic features. An exception was the indigenous Malay word "*selegie*," meaning "spear."[121] However, the area was primarily shaped by the Jewish community's own word, "*mahallah*." The fact that *mahallah* life persisted in British imperial Singapore, in the community's name and cultural practices, emphasizes that the straight lines and squares of the Raffles Town Plan did not override the *mahallah* mentality. Singaporean Jews and other residents overwrote the imperial map, producing a kind of palimpsest. This is especially important given that the dominant narrative situates Singapore's Baghdadi Jews among other Baghdadi Jewish diasporic communities who allied themselves with British colonialism.[122]

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118 H. F. Pearson, "Lt. Jackson's Plan of Singapore," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 42, no. 1 (July 1969): 161–165, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41491981.

119 Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

120 Behar, *A Neighborhood in Ottoman Istanbul*, 178–179.

121 Heirwin Mohd Nasir, "Selegie Road," *Singapore Infopedia*, National Library Board, Singapore Government Agency, accessed July 3, 2023, https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=837bb080-e5d3-4a00-b48f-f22593fcef0d.

122 For this argument in relation to the Baghdadi Jews of Singapore, see Goldstein, "The Jews of Singapore," 154; and Lim, "Decolonization and Its Aftermath."

In its transcultural exchanges and cohabitations, the *mahallah* acted as a foil for the British imperial vision of an ethnically divided Singapore. The only ethnic group singled out as not residing in, or according to some recollections, not even visiting the *mahallah*, were Europeans. Isaacs states that Baghdadi Jews mixed with Chinese, Malays, and Arabs, but never with Europeans. As a boy, he learned that the British looked down on the Jews and perceived them as Asian.[123] My mother also remembers never seeing Europeans in the *mahallah*. The absence of Europeans from the *mahallah* occurred not due to the *mahallah*'s exclusiveness, but because of the segregated world of the British Empire.

Despite the *mahallah*'s internal diversity, the divisions that surrounded the *mahallah* impinged on the Jewish community. Harry Elias comments that after the war, he was old enough to learn how British racism created injustice and perpetuated inequalities. Some *mahallah* Jews found it hard to get skilled jobs in the colonial system. British expatriates filled the teaching positions, and acceptance of Jews and other non-European residents was determined by skin color.[124] Both Grimberg and Ballas speak of the racial exclusivity of the British clubs.[125] The inclusion of Jews in these clubs depended on the period, their skin color, wealth, and degree of Anglicization or Westernization. In the next section, I look at how this segregated system came to create divisions among Baghdadi Jews and made some of them leave the *mahallah*.

Class splits

Although the *mahallah* superimposed and challenged some of the divisiveness propagated by British imperialism, British colonial racial divisions seeped into and amplified the divisions within the Jewish community of Singapore. These were primarily class and wealth divisions, which is unsurprising given the economic opportunities offered by Singapore and the impoverished backgrounds of most immigrants. Other loyalties and traditions pulled the Jews of Singapore in different directions: Western or Eastern influences; identifying with Britain/the British Empire, or identifying with the Middle East/Asia; modernizing versus nostalgic. These factors attached themselves to the class and wealth divisions. Social mobility in a British colony required Anglicization and Westernization. According to Nathan, the British administration encouraged such fissures with their system of racial division.[126] These splits were further exacerbated when the Ashkenazim (northern and

123 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 1.

124 Elias, interview, reel/disc 1.

125 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 3; and Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

126 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 58.

eastern European Jews) fleeing antisemitic pogroms and oppression in Europe began to arrive in Singapore from the late nineteenth century, their numbers increasing until the Second World War.[127]

Cultural clashes between European Jewish newcomers and Baghdadi Jews, and between European/Western-identified, wealthier Baghdadi Jews and Arabic/Eastern-identified, poorer Baghdadi Jews, become most visible in the visits of the *shlichim*. *Shlichim* were Zionist emissaries dispatched to Jews in the diaspora. They sought to raise awareness of Palestine (as it was called before the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948) as the Jewish homeland, to collect funds for Jewish education and religious institutions, and to give spiritual direction to diasporic Jews. The *shlichim* were missionaries in the sense that their larger goal was to bring about the return of the Jewish diaspora to the Jewish homeland. While the *shlichim* might have relocated to Palestine, most were Ashkenazim and therefore born in Europe.[128]

One such *shaliach* (emissary), Israel Cohen, the Secretary of the World Zionist Organization and a British Jew, visited Singapore in 1921 to rally support and finances in support of the Balfour Declaration of a Jewish homeland, which was proclaimed in 1917. Cohen visited Jewish communities in Australasia, the Middle East, North Africa, and some parts of Europe. In 1925 in London, he published an account of his travels, a mixture of travelogue, anthropology, and Zionist manifesto, which constitutes another record of personal memories of Jewish life in Singapore.[129] As a European and British-born Ashkenazi, Cohen provides an outside perspective of Singapore's Baghdadi Jews.

Cohen was critical of Singapore's *mahallah* Jews. Visiting the Maghain Aboth, he writes of the *hazan* (the cantor), whom he observed sitting barefoot in the synagogue and wearing a fez, that "Bagdad [*sic*] was still his spiritual home, for though he had spent fourteen years in this thriving British colony he could not yet speak a word of English."[130] Cohen here disapproved of the *hazan's* non-assimilation in the British colony. The cantor's main language—his mother tongue—was, as for other *mahallah* Jews, Arabic. Similarly, at the Talmud Torah, Cohen observes:

> [The] children … mostly poor, came to be initiated into Hebrew lore and the precepts and practices of Judaism at the hands of a single grey-bearded teacher, the Bagdad *Hazan*, in fez and white gaberdine; but how much they learned or understood it would be difficult to say, as their master, despite the many years he had been in Singapore, could not utter

127 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 57.

128 Roland, *Jews in British India*, 79.

129 Cohen, *Journal of a Jewish Traveller*.

130 Cohen, *Journal of a Jewish Traveller*, 198.

> a word of English and spoke only Arabic, whilst the lessons were often distracted by the visits of a brood of chickens with their vigilant mother, which strutted from an adjoining yard into the room, leaving many an impression behind.[131]

The Arabic dress (a "gaberdine" is presumably a robe, like the *dishdasha* that Lelah describes),[132] the Arabic language, and the chickens in the schoolgrounds may be intrinsic to *mahallah* life, but they are foreign to Cohen's sensibilities. Cohen later visits another *hazan* at a second synagogue in Singapore, the more recently built Chesed-El (1905). Although the *hazan* at this synagogue, another Baghdadi Jew, speaks Hebrew, Cohen writes that he "gabbled away at a rate and in an accent that made it difficult for me to follow."[133]

Back on board his ship and heading for Batavia (Jakarta), Cohen saves his most damning judgement for the interracial and transcultural mixing of Singaporean Jews. Throughout the settlements in the Straits, of which Singapore was then a part, along with Penang, Cohen characterized them as "Jews from Bagdad [*sic*], mostly poor pedlars, who consorted with Chinese and Malay women and lived debased lives."[134]

Despite Cohen's concerns, the dominant narrative is that Baghdadi Jews, particularly in India, identified with the British Empire.[135] Historians and biographers alike have argued that Baghdadi Jews assimilated with Britishness as a way of advancing under British imperial rule, and that they rejected all things "native" in their Eastern countries of immigration. However, this narrative depends on the wealthy class of Baghdadi Jews; it is by no means universal, and it does not include many of those I am calling *mahallah* Baghdadi Jews. As Sarah Abrevaya Stein has shown, Baghdadi Jews were by no means a homogenous group, and wealth played a crucial role in their ability to attain legal status and social recognition under British imperial rule.[136] Baghdadi Jews may only be cast as Jews who identified with

131 Cohen, *Journal of a Jewish Traveller*, 205–206.

132 Lelah, interview, reel/disc 2.

133 Cohen, *Journal of a Jewish Traveller*, 201.

134 Cohen, *Journal of a Jewish Traveller*, 208.

135 The narrative of Baghdadi Jews identifying with the British Empire can be found in many works. See Katz, *Who are the Jews of India*; Cernea, *Almost Englishmen*; Goldstein, "The Jews of Singapore". This narrative can also be found in the biographies of Sassoons. See Roth, *The Sassoon Dynasty*; Jackson, *The Sassoons: Portrait of a Dynasty*; and Sassoon, *The Global Merchants*. A more nuanced version of this narrative appears in Roland, *Jews in British India.* The class splits I discuss with a focus on Singapore, are found to be prevalent by Lim among Baghdadi Jews across British Asia. See Lim, "Decolonization and its Aftermath."

136 Sarah Abrevaya Stein, "Protected Persons? The Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora, the British State,

the empire if we allow empire to have two referents, that is, both British and Ottoman. *Mahallah* Jews held strongly onto the Ottoman Empire, although, as I have suggested, their past was more culturally Middle Eastern than strictly Ottoman. As Julia Phillips Cohen has shown, Jews challenged imperial belonging also in relation to the Ottoman Empire.[137] In any case, to advance in the European empires' colonies in which they found themselves, Baghdadi Jews were indeed incentivized to disidentify with their Middle Eastern pasts and to identify instead with the (Western) ruling European empire. In practice, however, this did not always work out.

Social mobility in European empires typically entailed moving out of the *mahallah* and leaving behind certain memories it articulated. As Emily Gottreich notes, it was during the period of increasing European imperial acquisition of Ottoman and former Ottoman states that many Ottoman or *mahallah* Jews, who did not have origins in Europe but acquired a new European identity, "began to move out of the traditional Jewish quarters and neighborhoods to the newer areas of the cities" built to accommodate, though not exclusively, Europeans.[138] This occurred not only in former Ottoman or Turkic territories like Iraq and Bukhara,[139] but in countries that had been under European rule for a longer time, such as colonial India and Burma.[140] In such cases, mobility was directed out of the *mahallah*, to greener, fresher areas, where spacious houses could be built. In Singapore, the wealthy moved to Katong, Grange Road, Eber Road, Meyer Road, Oxley Road, and Oxley Rise.[141] Those who made such moves did indeed become the Jews identifying with the British Empire—Westernizing while maintaining and adapting their Jewishness, cutting themselves off socially and culturally from the Jewish poor, even while becoming philanthropists to them. If, as I suggest, we view the *mahallah* as not just a physical site but a site of transcultural memory, moving out is not simply a matter of geographical departure. Rather, it entailed the de-Arabization of names, language, and dress, and cutting off the social relationships with Singapore's other local communities, which were part of

and the Persistence of Empire," *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 1 (February 2011): 80–108, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23307563.

137 Julia Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

138 Gottreich, "Jewish Quarters."

139 On this phenomenon in Iraq, see Marina Benjamin, *Last Days in Babylon: The Story of the Jews of Baghdad* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 129–130; on the same in Bukhara, see Cooper, "When a Neighbourhood Falls," 364.

140 On wealthy Jews leaving the old Jewish quarters in India, see Silliman, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames*, 47; on the same in Burma, see Cernea, *Almost Englishmen,* 37–39.

141 Simon, interview, reel/disc 19; Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

mahallah life. These departures created splits that fragmented families, as with my own, and ran deeply across generations, which also underlines that the *mahallah* is a site of transgenerational memory.[142]

Manasseh Meyer is frequently discussed in the oral histories as representative of the division within the Baghdadi Jewish community.[143] Meyer was Israel Cohen's host in Singapore and Asia's largest donor to Cohen's Zionist campaign. While Meyer was also an immigrant from Baghdad, in contrast to other *mahallah* Jews, he won Cohen's admiration.[144] Cohen admired Meyer's wealth, property, his social standing with the British (Meyer would be eventually knighted by the British in 1929 for his philanthropy and public service), and his piety. Upwardly mobile Jews such as Meyer and Moses Ezekiel Elias began their businesses in international trade (Meyer in opium, Elias in copra), but they built the majority of their wealth by investing in real estate, which enabled them to survive economic downturns. According to Nathan, by the 1900s, Meyer owned three-quarters of the property in Singapore.[145] As Isaacs recalls, "Manasseh Meyer was known to have a house in every street. Meyer Road, Meyer mansions … were named after him."[146]

Meyer made the split within the community concrete in the form of a second synagogue, which he built in a green suburb on a hill far from the *mahallah*. This second synagogue was Chesed-El, which, in the opinion of Cohen, offered, despite the *hazan*'s "gabbled" Hebrew, an experience more in accordance with his idea of a Shabbat service than what he had encountered at the Maghain Aboth in the *mahallah*. Meyer had been a founding trustee and member of the Maghain Aboth until differences arose over who was going to run the synagogue, according to Goldstein.[147] However, the oral histories suggest that the splits were wider and deeper. Simon states, "There got to be some quibbling amongst the people who were running Maghain Aboth

142 In my own family, the split was between two brothers who left Iraq and set up a spice trading business, first in India, and then in Singapore. One brother, my great-grandfather Isaac Ezekiel Elias, remained in the *mahallah* in Singapore, and as per articles in the newspapers, brought charges against members of his own family before the police, and was occasionally himself charged for minor criminal activities by the colonial authorities. The other brother, Moses Ezekiel Elias, known as the "copra king of Singapore," according to Nathan, left the *mahallah*, and appears in the newspapers as a philanthropist and stalwart of the Singapore Jewish community. See Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 27.

143 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 1 and 4; Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 3; Simon, interview, reel/disc 15 and 17; Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1; and Sassoon, interview, reel/disc 3.

144 Cohen, *Journal of a Jewish Traveller*, 199–205.

145 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 30.

146 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 3.

147 Goldstein, "Singapore, Manila and Harbin," 274.

synagogue."[148] Sassoon dismisses one of the claims that Meyer created Chesed-El only because he could no longer walk upstairs to the entrance of Maghain Aboth; he alleges instead that Meyer built Chesed-El out of "rivalry."[149]

Completed in 1905, Chesed-El was designed by British architects in the heavily ornamented style of the late Renaissance, incorporating continuous cornices and floral plasterwork, and including the letter "M," for Meyer, in its decoration.[150] Chesed-El (meaning the "loving kindness of God") was in no sense a modest building. Albert Einstein visited Singapore in 1922, the year after Israel Cohen, in order to raise funds for the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He was hosted by Meyer, whom he called "the Jewish Croesus of Singapore," and who he considered "shrewd" and "schematic" rather than expressive of "human kindness and communal spirit."[151] Bitingly, he described Chesed-El as "a sumptuous synagogue, essentially [built] solely for dealings between Croesus [Meyer] and Jehovah."[152] Meyer invited only Ashkenazi Jews and non-Jewish Europeans to meet Einstein. He excluded even the grandfather of Bernard Sassoon. Almost a century later, Sassoon recalls the episode and states that Meyer excluded non-Ashkenazis because he wanted to impress Einstein, who was himself an Ashkenazi.[153]

Chesed-El was understood by the community to be Meyer's "private synagogue," according to Grimberg.[154] Indeed, it was attached to Meyer's Belle Vue estate home on Oxley Rise. The Maghain Aboth, on the other hand, was considered to be the "people's synagogue."[155] In order to ensure the *minyan*, the presence of ten men which was required for the service, Meyer had to transport Jews from the *mahallah* in rickshaws.[156] Thus, while Meyer himself did not break the Shabbat prohibition on taking transport, his arrangement required poorer *mahallah* Jews to do so. Sassoon points out that those who went to Chesed-El tended to be less observant than those

148 Simon, interview, reel/disc 17.

149 Sassoon, interview, reel/disc 2.

150 "Chesed-El Synagogue," Roots, National Heritage Board 30, Singapore Government Agency, accessed July 3, 2023, https://www.roots.gov.sg/en/places/places-landing/Places/national-monuments/chesed-el-synagogue.

151 Albert Einstein, *The Travel Diaries of Albert Einstein*: *The Far East, Palestine, and Spain*, *1922–1923*, ed. Ze'ev Rosenkranz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 113–115.

152 Einstein, *Travel Diaries*, 113.

153 Sassoon, interview, reel/disc 1.

154 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 1.

155 Simon, interview, reel/disc 17.

156 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 36.

who went to Maghain Aboth.[157] The oral histories describe Chesed-El as a private "rich man's synagogue."[158] Some other wealthy Jews also gravitated to Chesed-El, and availed themselves of transport for their occasional visits to the Maghain Aboth, according to Simon. They were neither as religious nor as poor as the *mahallah* Jews.[159] While there was some traffic between the two synagogues, Ballas states that the Meyers would never come to the Maghain Aboth.[160]

The oral histories suggest that the class divisions within the Jewish community were strongly felt. There was a large gap between the rich, who lived outside of the *mahallah*, and the impoverished *mahallah* poor, according to Simon. Moreover, some of these poor worked for the wealthy.[161] This arrangement perhaps lies behind Grimberg's remark that the Jewish community in Singapore was "feudal" rather than democratic. His comments seem to be derived from his own family story: since his father worked for a wealthy line of the Elias family (no relation with the author), Grimberg grew up on their estate and he felt that they treated his father badly.[162] There was certainly philanthropy, including from Meyer and his daughter Moselle Nissim, whose charitable enterprises contributed to causes such as education, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and the Jewish Women's League. *Mahallah* Jews tended to be poorly educated, according to Isaacs.[163] Investment in education was therefore key to lifting families out of poverty. Harry Elias recounts how families such as his sometimes had to hawk jewelry in order to eat, and how they could not afford to go to the cinema, to own a watch or a proper pair of shoes, or for their children to have their own schoolbooks. Like a dozen or so Jewish students at Saint Andrew's, Harry Elias won a scholarship as a "free scholar," which provided him with schoolbooks.[164] Ballas, whose family was very poor but never accepted charity, recounts how rich Jews helped poor Jews sustain themselves, helping them with school fees, food, and rent.[165] Isaacs believes that the degree of intra-communal charitable organization distinguished the Jews from other communities in Singapore: "Jews weren't

157 Sassoon, interview, reel/disc 1.

158 See Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 4; also, Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

159 Simon, interview, reel/disc 19.

160 Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

161 Simon, interview, reel/disc 17.

162 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 3.

163 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 3.

164 Elias, interview, reel/disc 1.

165 Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

made to bunk up unlike other communities—eight in one room. The Chinese did not have this kind of charitable organization. Poor Jews were looked after much better."[166] Isaacs largely credits Meyer and Moselle Nissim for this alleged distinction.

However, philanthropy seems to have exacerbated, instead of alleviating, divisions in the Jewish community. Even those who did not grow up in the *mahallah,* such as Simon and Grimberg, observed widespread criticism of and sometimes resentment towards Meyer and other wealthy Jews. Simon was something of an intermediary due to belonging neither to a wealthy nor a poor family and having lived outside of Singapore for long periods. He remarks that Meyer, who made his wealth in the opium trade, had enemies: "One becomes wealthy by riding on the backs of people who cannot fight against you."[167] The "feudal" splits also rested on the fact that, as Isaacs comments, the rich rarely had anything to do with the poor.[168] Ballas, whose dislike of Meyer's lifestyle is well documented, also discusses the gap between rich and poor, and questions the motivation behind the philanthropy.[169] He states that the rich gave "because basically the Jewish people didn't want poor Jews to beg in the street or to beg from other communities because that would put them to shame."[170] Ballas also engaged in philanthropy, which was international in scope and extended to the needy irrespective of whether or not they were Jewish.[171] Isaacs also took a cynical view: "The rich wouldn't mix with poor but they would help financially. … They wouldn't allow any Jewish person to starve. They wouldn't like the poor but they would help them." [172] He recounts how there was no social mixing even in youth clubs such as that on Serangoon Road: "Those who thought they were millionaires wouldn't mix with those they thought in the lower categories."[173] There were no common activities except those that took place in the synagogues—and even then, these were divided by synagogue.

Moshe Elias has suggested that even the Maghain Aboth was divided between Western, Anglicizing Baghdadis and those who held on to their

166 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 3

167 Simon, interview, reel/disc 17.

168 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 17.

169 Ballas's dislike of Meyer is also discussed in Sassoon, interview, reel/disc 1.

170 Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

171 Dinesh Sathisan and Sharen Chua, "Jacob Ballas," *Singapore Infopedia*, National Library Board, Singapore Government Agency, accessed July 3, 2023, https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=9d16f0db-9f88-43bc-8e4b-64e3417d62e0.

172 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 3.

173 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 3.

Arabic past. He told me his experience of this division while growing up in the 1930s and early 1940s:

> When one climbed the first steps of the Maghain Aboth Synagogue, raised above ground level in case of flooding, and faced the bimah there was an invisible line running down the center all the way to the other end. To the right, sat the Arabic speakers where your grandfather sat, and to the left, the English speakers, where my father sat, and seldom the twain did meet, except at Simha Torah [a Jewish festival celebrating the Torah] when the congregation sang, and danced, and mingled.[174]

My grandfather and great-grandfather remained poor in the *mahallah*. Moshe's side of the family, with his grandfather Moses Elias, managed to move out of the *mahallah* and build their wealth, like Meyer, by investing in property.

Some of the fissures in the community were apparently so toxic that some of the oral history interviews—on "Jewish enclaves" and the distinction between the rich and poor Jews—were placed under embargo for seventy-five years and will not be available until near the end of this century.[175] I will not be alive to examine them.

Ballas blames class divisions for the disintegration of the Jewish community of Singapore, which I discuss further in the next section. He corroborates Moshe Elias's point about the divided synagogue, likely referring to the Maghain Aboth, and underlines the different racialization of Baghdadi Jews along the lines of wealth:

> You see, you had the rich Jews, who didn't want to mix up with the poor ones. The problem was, of course, the British, the English system, which accepted the rich Jews to become Europeans and the poor Jews to be considered Asians. And so, there was that barrier and they didn't want to mix up too much with the poor Jews. They were willing to support the poor Jews, they were willing to give them school fees. But other than that, they didn't want to mix up with them. So, there was a bit of a barrier. … The synagogue also the same, they came to the synagogue, but they each one had their own seats. They sat there, they prayed together, but they were not really close. And it's a great pity because I believe that is one

174 Moshe Elias, email to author, May 26, 2023. A similar scene appears in Elias's novel; see Elias, *Messiahs of Princep Street*, 71. A less detailed and more innocuous account of the class splits appears in Saltoon, *My Sister Meda*, 62.

175 See, for example, the catalogue entry Charlie Daniel Sion, interview by Patricia Lee, June 27, 2001, accession no. 002538, reel/disc 1, 4, 6, and 8, Communities of Singapore (Part 1), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, accessed July 4, 2023, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/012293d2-115f-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad.

> of the great reasons why this community disintegrated. Because the rich Jews had a lot of good business. … They didn't employ us, they didn't take us into their folds, they didn't grow with us. They didn't get married also. … The community all disintegrated.[176]

Ballas identifies the Second World War as the main period of disintegration, but he emphasizes that the class splits, underpinned by the racial divisions of the British Empire and colonial Singapore, were the prime mover of the degradation:

> The community here has been unfortunate because of that original leadership of those rich Jews. If they helped the poor Jews, and took them into their business, and treated them as equals, there would have been at least four, five thousand Jews in Singapore. Unfortunately, they didn't, because of the British traditions … making the rich accepted in the English clubs, and the poor were not accepted. That was the first curse. The second one that made this community disintegrate was the war.[177]

The class splits, which were racialized and informed by British imperialism, eventually led to the dissolution of the *mahallah* as a physically inhabited Jewish space.

Mahallah memories

The community reached its demographic highpoint just before the Second World War, when there were estimated to be over 1500 Jews in Singapore.[178] In December 1941, the Japanese began to bomb Singapore, and Japanese forces occupied the island from February 1942 to September 1945. As Ballas indicates, the Second World War was the second cause of the community's

176 Jacob Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

177 Jacob Ballas, interview, reel/disc 4. Interviewing Ballas at about the same time as this oral history interview, Tudor Parfitt records him as passing an even more devastating and caustic judgement: "There were some very rich Jews and some very poor Jews. *We* were very poor Jews. I have always resented the fact that the Meyer family, which was fabulously wealthy at the time, could have used their money to ensure that no Jew in Singapore was on the breadline. But they didn't. The Meyers would not even have noticed it. If they had used their money properly we would have had a Jewish community here of twenty or thirty thousand people. We could have saved Jews from Europe perhaps and could have been one of the greatest Jewish communities of the world. But instead they used to make us crawl up the hill from Waterloo Street to their mansion to accept the two-dollar charity they doled out once a year." Tudor Parfitt, *The Thirteenth Gate: Travels Among the Lost Tribes of Israel* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 86.

178 "History," The Jewish Community of Singapore, https://singaporejews.com/history-2/, accessed July 3, 2023. Bieder gives two thousand as the figure for this time, although she indicates that it includes refugees from Europe. Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 89.

disintegration, forcing about half of its members, mainly women and children, to evacuate. Many were transported to Bombay, including my mother and her immediate family, and Moshe Elias and some of his family. Others ended up in Australia, Palestine, or, eventually, the UK or USA. Ballas suggests that evacuation rendered permanent emigration more attractive.[179] Isaacs states that some emigrants, who never returned after the war, encouraged those remaining in the community to emigrate.[180]

Jewish men in Singapore, the majority of whom were not evacuated, were interned in Singapore, first in Changi Jail from April 1943, and then in Sime Road Camp from May 1944 until the surrender of Japan in September 1945. Some men, like Marshall, were deported to Japan for forced labor. Many Jewish homes in Singapore were requisitioned by the Japanese or taken over by non-Jewish Singaporeans. Permitted by the Japanese to enter Meyer's former home in order to retrieve an *etrog* for celebrating *Sukkot*, one community member found that Meyer's estate had been turned into a Japanese temple.[181] According to Nathan, particularly before the internment of Jewish men, the Maghain Aboth remained central to the community, becoming the means for exchanging news and material support.[182] Nathan recalls adhering to Jewish burial rites and fasting on *Yom Kippur* as well as keeping Shabbat and observing other festivals in the camps.[183] However, there seems to have been a variation in the ability to sustain Judaic practices in this environment. Sion Elias and Flossie Joseph, both also interned in camps, found it hard to adhere to practices such as keeping Shabbat.[184]

Marshall's return to Singapore in early 1946 began the period when the Jewish community of Singapore would come to political prominence and shape the political future of Singapore. Although he questioned and eventually rejected the rites of Judaism as a religion, Marshall understood that his heritage as a Baghdadi Jew was significant in his election as Chief Minister in 1955. In his winning speech, he declared that "by electing a member of the smallest domiciled community here [the Jews of Singapore] they [the voters of Singapore] have proved that Singapore can work, think and act non-

179 Jacob Ballas, interview, reel/disc 5.

180 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 3.

181 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 110.

182 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 110. Saltoon writes that the Maghain Aboth became her family's "stronghold, a place of refuge." Saltooon, *My Sister Meda*, 100.

183 Nathan, *History of Jews in Singapore*, 124, 130.

184 Elias and Joseph, interview, reel/disc 4, March 13, 2002.

communally."[185] At the time, Marshall cast himself as a "stranger."[186] Speaking about his beliefs with Tutor Parfitt much later in the 1980s, Marshall said:

> The fact that I am a Jew is not without significance. There is a Jewish cry for justice which echoes down the corridor of the centuries and that cry for justice has encouraged many social reforms in many parts of the world. … If you wear the shoe that pinches, you know exactly where and why it hurts. We have worn the shoe of injustice for centuries.[187]

Marshall also insisted that he was "Asiatic," and "not white."[188] He understood how his Baghdadi Jewishness made him an intermediary between the Chinese majority of Singapore and the British colonial governors. According to Isaacs, those in the Jewish community who did not support the British supported Marshall.[189]

On his return, Marshall helped to establish the Jewish Welfare Association, later renamed as the Jewish Welfare Board (JWB), and became its first president.[190] The JWB was the first officially run body overseeing community welfare.[191] It took a systemized approach to caring for the poor, as opposed to the individualized philanthropy practiced in earlier periods. The establishment of the JWB was a response to and coincided with the return of the evacuees to Singapore. The oral histories include interviews with several former presidents or members of the JWB.[192] They speak about how the JWB managed the Maghain Aboth and Singapore's Jewish cemeteries and opened a home for the aged members of the community on Waterloo Street, later relocated to Wilkie Road. The JWB's funds came from member contributions and compensation paid by the Singapore government when, in order to make way for urban development, the government compelled the JWB to successively disinter the bodies from two Jewish cemeteries and consolidate them into a single cemetery. The organization also helped to secure the return of Meyer's property and trust funds from the Japanese. This period also seems to have been the cultural

185 David Marshall quoted in Kevin Y. L. Tan, *Marshall of Singapore: A Biography* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 240.

186 Marshall quoted in Tan, *Marshall of Singapore,* 240.

187 Parfitt, *The Thirteenth Gate*, 79.

188 Parfitt, *The Thirteenth Gate*, 79.

189 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 10.

190 Simon, interview, reel/disc 20, June 16, 1984.

191 Sassoon, interview, reel/disc 2.

192 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 3; Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 9, December 06, 1983; Simon, interview, reel/disc 5; and Elias, interview, reel/disc 1.

highpoint for the community, with legendary parties at the Menorah Club, because, as Sassoon puts it, "We knew it [the Jewish community in Singapore] wasn't going to last forever, but yet you tried to make it last."[193]

Parts of the *mahallah* were reconstructed after the war, although the oral histories say little about this. For five years after their return to Singapore in July 1946, my mother and her family were placed in a series of temporary homes, from the Sime Road Camp, which became the main transit zone for returning refugees after the war, moving back into the *mahallah* and to its heart, Short Street. The family was placed in one of the first post-war construction projects of the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), located on Short Street. The JWB paid the family's rent. One of Marshall's key roles at this time was to oversee and approve SIT building projects, and he challenged the colonial government on its failure to deal with the housing problem, especially for returning refugees.[194] Of the homes in the *mahallah* that had not already been bombed, many were demolished to make way for modern housing, which was considered more sanitary. Much of the old architecture that characterized the *mahallah* therefore disappeared. However, my mother remembers that their new apartments also allowed for proximity to other Jewish and non-Jewish families. Like the previous housing styles, they had verandas and the surrounding yards were shared spaces where hawkers set up stalls and children of different ethnicities and religions could play together.

Born in 1938, my mother belonged to the last generation of Jews to grow up with a habitus shaped by the *mahallah*. With the exception of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, the Jews of Singapore did not register a threat to their belonging, neither under the colonial government nor once Singapore attained full independence from the British in 1963. Unlike in Iraq, where Jews experienced a pogrom as the modern state emerged from British rule and patronage, Jews in Singapore were not subjected to state persecution, and there was no mass exodus.[195] The gradual dwindling of the Jewish community in Singapore bears a closer resemblance to that of the Jewish communities in Bombay and Calcutta, where, the claim is often made, Jews faced no antisemitism.[196] Oral history interviews of non-Jews in the National Archives of Singapore include stereotypes about Jews, particularly involving Jews being moneyed or good at business, but there is ambivalence

193 Sassoon, interview, reel/disc 1.

194 Tan, *Marshall of Singapore,* 158.

195 On the pogrom in and exodus from Iraq, see Tamar Morad, Dennis Shasha, and Robert Shasha, ed., *Iraq's Last Jews: Stories of Daily Life, Upheaval, and Escape from Modern Babylon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

196 On the lack of antisemitism in India, see Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India*, 4; Roland, *Jews in British India*, 2; and Manasseh, *Baghdadian Jews of Bombay*, 33.

even among those who hold such views. For example, N.I. Narayanan, a Singapore-born Indian who worked with Ballas in his business during the 1960s, repeats how the arcade where several Jews had offices used to be known as "sharkade." However, he expresses strong respect for Ballas and for Singapore Jews, and he regrets the dwindling of the community, which he found to be similar to the disappearance of the Jewish community in his father's ancestral home of Kerala.[197]

Jews born in Singapore in the first decades of the twentieth century, like those who arrived in Singapore in the nineteenth century, experienced an environment in which adoption and/or assimilation of British norms was the principal means of upward mobility. Some members of this generation, such as Grimberg, Moshe Elias, and Marshall, acquired part of their education in the UK. My mother was offered a fellowship for university in the UK through a women's education scheme established by Marshall, but her family needed her to stay in Singapore. She left school at fifteen to support them, eventually emigrating to the UK in 1961 after she met my British, non-Jewish father. According to Ballas, those educated abroad—if they came back—influenced their parents who had stayed, and thus whole families emigrated.[198] Those who stayed, according to Grimberg, were either too poor or had business interests, and he believed that both groups would eventually disappear.[199] Isaacs suggests that the old divisions deepened among those who stayed, between rich Jews who made money through import-export trade and property, and who had foreign guests and tennis courts, and poor traders and hawkers, as well as those on welfare who lived on Short Street and Bencoolen Street.[200]

The foundation of Israel in 1948 seems to have had little influence on the community. It did not lead to mass emigration, as it did for Jews in Iraq, following their experience of pogrom and persecution. Isaacs emphasizes that Singapore Jews were not Zionists; they felt that they were a part of Singapore, and thus did not long for a homeland elsewhere. He notes that the place least emigrated to was Israel, and that more of the community left for Australia and the USA, many moving to Los Angeles, which has one of largest communities of diasporic Singapore Jews.[201] Ballas suggests that Singaporean Jews did

197 N. I. Narayanan, interview by Kanniga, June 07, 2010, accession no. 002184, reel/disc 15, Special Project, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/002184. On the dwindling of the Jews of Kerala, or the Cochin Jews, see Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

198 Ballas, interview, reel/disc 1.

199 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 3.

200 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 3.

201 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 9.

not look to Israel in the same way as their European counterparts, because of the lack of antisemitism in Singapore.[202] According to Grimberg, the Yom Kippur War of 1973 strengthened connections between the Singaporean Jews and Israel, as did Israel's subsequent help in developing Singapore's armed forces.[203] Unlike in other former British protectorates, such as Iraq and Egypt, Isaacs insists that "relations between Arabs and Jews in Singapore remained very good, unaffected."[204] Simon suggests that there were other historical events that caused the Jewish community in Singapore to dwindle, including the Maria Hertogh religious riots in Singapore in 1950, the Korean War of the 1950s, and fears about the rise of Asia.[205] Elias and Isaacs also cite fears about the rise of communism as a cause for emigration.[206] Saltoon relates how her larger family emigrated because they were uncertain of what Singapore's independence from Britain meant, also fearing communism under the People Action's Party, the successors to Marshall's Labour Party.[207]

Emigration had a snowball effect. As the Jewish population waned, some families felt that their children had little prospect of finding suitable partners. Simon attributes the retention of a strong cultural identity among the Jews in Singapore to their disapproving of intermarriage and not welcoming converts. Conversion to Judaism was difficult, he emphasized, particularly for Chinese women. Simon sees no conflict between the assimilation of Western values or emigration to the West and his doubts about mixed marriages, especially with the Chinese. For him, there is no question of congruence between Asian and Jewish identities.

Ballas blames what he sees as the failure to assimilate into Singapore's multicultural environment for the dissolution of the community. He identified a number of factors for this segregation, ranging from kosher rules that restricted Jews' ability to eat in the homes of those from other communities (which he perceives as an insult to non-Jews), the rich refusing to mix with the poor, and the taboo on intermarriage. He suggested that some in the community actively prevented intermarriage, by which he means both marrying out of the Jewish community and rich Jews intermarrying with

202 Ballas, interview, reel/disc 4.

203 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 4.

204 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 10.

205 Simon, interview, reel/disc 19. For the Maria Hertogh riots, see "Maria Hertogh Riots," *Singapore Infopedia*, National Library Board, Singapore Government Agency, last modified September 28, 2014, accessed July 11, 2023, https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=fbc266c5-4f6f-49d8-b77e-d37e20742087.

206 Elias, interview, reel/disc 1; and Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 8.

207 Saltoon, *My Sister Meda*, 175 and 207.

poorer sections of the community. The second phenomenon led to why, in his eyes, the Jewish community on both sides of the class divide died out in Singapore, and he blames the British for the divisions between what he calls the Anglicized Jews and the Middle Eastern or Arab-identifying poor. Ballas expresses a positive view of intermarriage and conversion, contrary to popular conceptions: "I would have liked to have seen more conversions—more Chinese become Jews or Jews become Chinese, makes no difference to me. … But to a lot of people it does matter."[208] He clearly did not perceive assimilation as a threat to the community.

Many expressed regret about the changes in the community after the Second World War. There is a palpable sense of nostalgia for Jewish identity and life as it was practiced in the *mahallah*. Despite the perception of inevitable community decline, many of those interviewed articulate their strong Singaporean identification, their sense of belonging, and desire to remain in Singapore. Perhaps the combination of identification with Singapore and nostalgia for the Jewish past can be attributed to the fact that most of the interviewees are first or second-generation Singapore Jews who were at least in their sixties at the time of their interviews. Joe Grimberg expressed his regrets about his earlier identification with the British. At the time of the interview in 1983, he perceived himself as Asian, rather than Caucasian, and he realized that his education in the UK created a cultural confusion that would not have occurred had he remained in Singapore. He thus belatedly adopts Marshall's self-identification as Asian.[209]

Others express a sense that the openness and variation that used to characterize Singapore Jewish practice have been overtaken by more restrictive ways. Isaacs, who never got past that one day in Talmud Torah or learned Hebrew, sent his children to Jewish schools in Singapore, which by then (the 1950s and 1960s), were receiving religious teachings from the Israelis. Subsequently, his daughter joined a *kibbutz* in Israel. Isaacs observes Shabbat and does not eat food that he considers unclean, such as pork, but he finds his daughter's actions, including her strict kosher home life, particularly her refusal to allow her child an ice cream when out in the city, to be "fanatic."[210]

The JWB estimates that there are 2000 Jews currently residing in Singapore. This compares to 832 recorded in a 1931 census (they would have been mostly of Middle Eastern origin), 1500 in 1939 (the substantial increase was due to European Jews fleeing persecution), and 450 at the end of the

208 Jacob Ballas, interview, reel/disc 4; see also Ballas, interview, reels/discs 2 and 3.

209 Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 3.

210 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 8.

1960s, the decade that my mother left Singapore.[211] The current figure may look as though the dwindling community was eventually replenished, but, as Bieder points out, most of the new members are transient Israelis and other expatriates, as well as Ashkenazim; "including this new group" in estimating Singapore's Jewish community "could be a challenge."[212] Since Ashkenazi Jews have provided a steadily increasing contribution to the Singapore Jewish population, the Jewish demographic has changed. Sassoon worries that Ashkenazi culture is overwhelming Sephardic culture, and he is concerned about the establishment of the Reform movement in Singapore, which includes, since 1993, a synagogue "without walls" that meets in public spaces. Sassoon foresees that these changes will lead to the demise of the JWB.[213] He is one among several interviewees to predict or ponder over the disappearance of the community.[214] However, these prognostications are now forty years old, and the fears they expressed have not yet materialized.

I last visited the *mahallah* from December 2022 until January 2023 with my mother. Walking around the *mahallah*, we tried to discern what remains. There are a few features that suggest a Jewish past. The David Elias Building (no relation to the author), constructed in 1928 by a Jewish merchant to house his trading company, still stands on the corner of Middle Road and Short Street, its Magen David (Star of David) still visible.[215] Most of the old homes have been demolished, although some of the larger houses on the edge of the *mahallah* have been preserved and renovated (for example, where Mount Emily Road meets Niven Road). Likewise, most of the flats constructed by the SIT after the Second World War have been demolished and replaced by skyscrapers containing offices, shops, and eateries. However, a few blocks of flats on Short Steet have been renovated, including my mother's block. These are now residences for students of the Singapore Management University, as part of their Prinsep Street campus.[216] There are few Jewish residents in the area, although the Albert Shooker Welfare Home for the elderly (a gift of

211 "History," The Jewish Community of Singapore, https://singaporejews.com/history-2/, accessed July 3, 2023.

212 Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 196.

213 Sassoon, interview, reel/disc 2.

214 See Sassoon, interview, reel/disc 2; Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 10; Grimberg, interview, reel/disc 4; and Simon, interview, reel/disc 20.

215 Naidu Ratnala Thulaja, "David Elias Building," *Singapore Infopedia*, National Library Board, Singapore Government Agency, accessed July 4, 2023, https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=9fa160bf-8483-4c4b-abaf-2417e6fa8a49.

216 "Prinsep Street Residences (PSR)," Singapore Management University, accessed June 30, 2023, https://www.smu.edu.sg/campus-life/facilities-leasing/student-facilities/campus-housing/prinsep-street-residences-psr.

another philanthropic Iraqi Jew) remains on Wilkie Road, and is still occupied by Jews.[217] This is despite the prognostications about the home's demise.[218]

Fig. 4. The Jews of Singapore Museum, *December 2022. Photograph by the author.*

The Maghain Aboth remains on Waterloo Street. It has been very well preserved and has not struggled to obtain a *minyan*.[219] It still holds daily

217 Michelle Elias, email to author, June 19, 2023.

218 Sassoon, interview, reel/disc 2.

219 Dilapidation of the buildings and difficulty in obtaining a *minyan* was evident in the synagogues in Kolkata and Mumbai, when I visited them in the mid-2000s.

services, and the *Hannukah* service we attended was characterized by a volume of singing and an ornamental style that I have not heard in any Western synagogue. While not Iraqi, the rabbi, Mordechai Abergel, who is also the Chief Rabbi of Singapore, is of Sephardi Moroccan origin, and he has imported his Sephardi North African tradition into the liturgy. The Jacob Ballas Centre is now attached to the synagogue, which was built in 2007 in memory of and with funds from Ballas. The center provides, among other facilities, apartments, offices for the rabbi, a *yeshivah*, a kosher shop and restaurant (called Awafi—the Arabic term for *bon appétit*), and a room for slaughtering kosher chickens.[220] At the end of 2021, a new museum opened on the ground floor of the center, known as the Jews of Singapore Museum (see Fig. 4), which narrates the story of the community and celebrates key figures such as Marshall, Ballas, and Meyer.

The museum dedicates a small part of its exhibition to the *mahallah*, including an audio clip of Harry Elias speaking about the *mahallah* using the analogy of the ghetto but then explaining how it was not like a ghetto, in the ways that I have suggested earlier. The *mahallah* is thus memorialized in Singapore, not only in the museum, but through the oral histories and Moshe Elias's novel and Saltoon's family memoir. While the *mahallah* is no longer a characteristically or vitally Jewish area, the museum does not offer a lachrymose view of Singapore's Jewish history. Incorporated in a Jewish community center and attached to an active synagogue, the museum remains closely connected to the community. The emphasis of the exhibition is local and historical rather than general and religious; that is to say it is focused particularly on the Singapore Jewish community rather than on Judaism or Jews at large.[221] When my mother and I visited, Jewish children from Singapore's *cheder* (Jewish school), which is housed in the Jacob Ballas Centre, were playing in the museum as we looked at the displays. Despite the prognostications of the oral histories, the museum connects the history of the community with the future of the community.

Conclusion

The *mahallah* in Singapore has much in common with other *mahallah*s, especially those in other parts of the world, but it is unique in the way that it has rooted itself in an English-language-dominated country. As I have argued, its trans-imperial formation and cross-cultural diversity posed a contrast to the divisions of British

220 "History," Our Community, The Jewish Community of Singapore, Jewish Welfare Board, accessed July 3, 2023, https://singaporejews.com/history-2/.

221 The Jews of Singapore Museum thus makes for an interesting contrast with the London Jewish Museum (which recently made the decision to close), which emphasized Judaica rather than Jews in London or in Britain.

colonialism. *Mahallah* life was characterized by community cohesion, but due to the pressure of surrounding colonial divisions, the community split along the lines of class and of self-identification in terms of East versus West. The *mahallah* lives on as a memorial term in the oral histories and is celebrated in the museum. This transformation into a memory is quite appropriate, given that the *mahallah* was always a site of transcultural memorialization, a place and concept inextricably associated with memory and cultural mobility, as I have shown.

If the outlook of being a Jew in Singapore is remembered as a challenge to British racism, as it is in this closing quote from an oral history interview, this opposition is in no small part due to the robustly Jewish but simultaneously transcultural identity of the Singapore Jewish *mahallah*:

> In Singapore, there is no such thing. Be him Sephardic, be him Ashkenazi, be him Indian, be him Malay, Chinese or any other race, we treat everybody equally. I think it also has something to do with the government encouragement of multiracial society, where everybody will have to live together. But then again even pre-war we [Singapore Jews] used to mix with all nationalities—except the British, who feel that they are superior, and they are not allowed to be seen with the locals, because if they are seen, their friends see them talking to the locals, it means they have done something serious. Because they have to uphold their prestige and be seen as superior. Before the war. No more now, especially after the war. Now if any Britisher comes to Singapore and says, "we're not allowed to mix with the locals," we'll tell them to go to hell.[222]

222 Isaacs, interview, reel/disc 10.