

Notes on the Farhud

By: Nissim Rejwan

Rashid `Ali's Coup and Its Aftermath

The one and only productive thing I remember doing during the whole month of May 1941 was reading the bulky William Collins's edition of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. I was then out of a job anyway and in the second form of my intermediate school; I don't quite remember whether there was school during that month of war, but our stay in Beit Abu Ya`qoub enabled me to have my own quiet corner to read.

Although the trouble had started early in April and had resulted in the escape from his palace of the Regent Abdul Ilah, actual hostilities between Iraq and Britain started only at dawn on May 2. Twenty-eight days after, on May 29, a Committee of Internal Security was formed by the mayor of Baghdad, Arshad al `Umari, with a view to negotiating an armistice following Rashid `Ali's escape across the border to Persia together with his chief lieutenants. On May 30, al `Umari went to see the British ambassador, Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, and there signed an armistice agreement whose terms were dictated by the British.

Throughout the war, which some have called the Thirty-Day War, the populace in Iraq's major cities was in a state of euphoria, which alternated with attacks of fear and xenophobia. There were some cases of minor molesting against the Jews, whose every movement tended to be interpreted as some satanic pro-British device. Jews engaging in completely innocuous activities in the course of their daily lives were accused of making signals to British airplanes flying over Baghdad, and in some cases were taken to police stations and then released after the absurdity of the accusations became clear.

A number of Jewish merchants and traders took home valuable goods and items from their shops and places of business for safekeeping. It was not quite safe or wise for a Jew to be out at night and, if he or she were really careful and sensible, not even during the day. Not only did this state of affairs fail to interfere with my life: I actually used it to advantage. At long last I was able to stay home and do my reading in peace, without any nagging from my parents about "finding something to do besides lazying around."

But there was trouble still to come. On May 31, after the facts became known and the regent announced he would return to Baghdad the following day, the Jews started to relax. The day was a Saturday and life for them seemed to return to normal. The following day, however, happened to be the first day of the Feast of the Pentecost. It was a habit with the Jews of Baghdad on such holidays to go out for a walk after prayers and breakfast--and on that particular Sunday many Jews felt it was safe enough to go out for a stroll, dressed up in their Sabbath clothes and usually with pockets full of watermelon seeds and an assortment of nuts to while away the time.

That day being also in some way a day of deliverance from the dangers posed by the pro-Nazi regime of Rashid `Ali, however, many Jews thought the occasion worthy of a double celebration, and what with reports of the crown regent's impending arrival some of them saw fit to go out for the specific purpose of participating in what was intended to be a mass welcome for him and for his entourage. Little did they know the nature of the surprises that were awaiting them.

Various versions have been told of what actually happened that Sunday and the following day. According to official figures, the riots and murders that took place on those two days claimed a total of 110 dead, among them 28 women, and 204 injured--and that the victims were from both sides, Jews and Muslims.

The number of homes and shops assaulted and broken into was not given by the authorities, but according to statistics prepared by Jewish community officials the figure for shops and stores alone was 586, while the total value of goods, valuables, and money looted was 271,402 Iraqi dinars. As to homes, the community gave the figure as 911, with a total of 3,395 families and 12,311 inhabitants--and that the total material loss sustained by them was 383,878 dinars. Unlike the official version, again, which mentioned no cases of rape, the community gave an estimate of three or four such cases.

The Jews of Baghdad were caught completely unaware. To be sure, they had very good reason to celebrate: Here at last was an end to the month-old molestation and harassments to which Rashid `Ali's regime subjected them in so many petty and unpredictable ways. The British, who were fighting Hitler's hordes, were victorious. Thus when they went out to watch the crown regent's triumphal march back that fateful Sunday, they thought they could afford to appear a little defiant, feeling secure in the knowledge that the army and the security forces were now fully in control.

What actually happened, however, was that not only did the British forces fail to enter the capital but the defeated Iraqi soldiers and officers were disbanded and allowed to enter Baghdad singly rather than in formation--and these could not help noticing the small groups of Jews heading in the opposite direction, dressed in their best clothes to welcome the regent and his entourage. What must have made things worse was that the day was a Sunday, and as far as these soldiers knew the Jews had no apparent reason to dress so festively and loiter in the streets other than the day's special occasion--namely the return of the regent under open armed protection from the hated British.

The trouble started late Sunday morning, when a group of soldiers crossing the Khir Bridge to the western side of the city met a group of Jews on their way to share in greeting the crown prince. The Jews were attacked, first with blows and then with knives--and of those who couldn't run for their lives a total of sixteen were injured and one died of his wounds. As the morning progressed and the attacks became more savage, some of the civilians, passersby, and bystanders took part in the fracas--while the policemen on duty at the bridge acted as mere onlookers and did not lift a finger.

Word quickly spread to the other side of the bridge, where the Jews were concentrated--and when it reached the slum areas adjoining King Ghazi Street groups began to gather. Rumors spread that the police were not interfering, although on several occasions they fired warning shots into the air when houses were forced open and their contents looted.

Taking heart at this obvious encouragement and seeing that not only the soldiery but some of the policemen were taking part in the forages, the mobs in such destitute neighborhoods as Abu Sifain and Ras el-Tchol--where Muslims and Jews lived in close proximity--became more systematic, and by early afternoon large trucks were seen moving furniture and other household goods from one side of the city to the other. According to an official commission later appointed to investigate the events and report on them, soldiers accompanying these lorries told enquiring police officers that they were merely moving the office furniture of the Iraqi Air Force headquarters, which had moved to another address!

These forages, often accompanied by physical violence resulting in deaths and injuries, and provoking no effective reaction on the part of the police, led the governor (mutasarraf) of the Baghdad Province to try to take charge himself. But when he asked the police officers on the spot why they were refraining from shooting at the attacking mobs, the reply was that "there were no orders." He got the same reply when he approached the chief of police.

It was only when he brought an order, signed by the regent himself, that orders were issued to fire at looters and murderers. It took just over an hour to scatter the mobs and empty the streets. By that time, however, the farhud (the untranslatable Arabic word which best describes the events of those two days) had spread throughout the poor neighborhoods in and around Ghazi Street as well as to some far districts like Al-A`dhamiyya and el-Karrada al-Shariqiyya. In this latter neighborhood, where the attacks took place only on the second day, six Jews were injured and one Muslim who tried to defend his Jewish neighbors was killed.

It is interesting to note here that Karrada and some of the more fashionable suburbs of Baghdad, where Jews constituted a majority of the inhabitants, witnessed the least trouble, some of them none at all. In many cases, armed Muslim neighbors stood guard and managed to chase away mobs intending to attack and loot.

The Farhud and I

Totally unaware of what was going on in other parts of the city, I left the house just a little after 4:00 P.M. that same Sunday and took the bus to Bab el-Sharqi, where the open-air cafes and snack bars were. As usual, my friends and I had a meal of kebab, chips, and salad and sat there chatting and discussing the month's events for the nth time. Although a true patriot himself, my Muslim friend Salman was pleased with the outcome of Rashid `Ali's rebellion since the British and their allies were fighting the Nazis and

Fascists. Anti-British he certainly was, but like many moderate Iraqis with left-wing leanings he was content with leaving his anti-imperialist sentiments in abeyance.

But, of course, our preoccupations were not solely or even mainly political, and Salman and I discussed literature and my latest readings and "discoveries," while he related his endless jokes and anecdotes both from Arab literary and social history and from his experiences in Al-Zubeir, a townlet in the south of Iraq from which he hailed and which was known mainly for two phenomena--the exceptional quality of its dates and the disproportionate number of active homosexuals in its population. Salman himself, I suspected, was a homosexual; he never had a good word to say about a woman's looks and throughout our time together I never could persuade him to accompany me on my way to see a prostitute.

There was no indication whatever of what was going on not far from where we sat and chatted--and when it was time to leave--about 10:00 or 11:00 P.M.--we decided that the weather was too good to take a bus and walked the whole length of Al-Rashid Street on the way to our homes. During that long stroll, I began to feel that something was not quite as it should be. There was, for instance, a small group of Jewish young men who were carefully following in our footsteps, trying not to lose sight of us. There were also fewer buses going.

But it was only when we approached Suq el-Shorja and the adjoining way that led to the Taht el-Takya quarter that I began to feel something was definitely wrong. Besides Salman and myself, there was with us a young Jewish friend whose home happened to be in an alley leading from Taht el-Takya to a parallel alley also leading to Al-Rashid Street. Seeing that something was wrong, we decided to walk him to the door of his home and thus took the turn to the way leading to the Jewish quarter. As soon as we took that turn, a group of about ten or twelve young men felt encouraged to do the same--but they decided to make a run of it. They knew no doubt what was going on at the other side of the city.

We duly saw our friend safely home, refusing to leave him until he was inside the house. Then Salman decided, and I did not object, that he should see me home as well. I will never forget the way in which I was let in. I had a key to the door, but the door was bolted and I could not go in. When I knocked I was asked who it was and only after assuring the people inside that it was me that they agreed to come down from the roof--where Baghdadis slept in summer--and opened the door. It transpired that my people, and the family that was sharing the house with us, had got wind of what was happening and, seeing that I was so late (it was nearing midnight by the time I was home) simply gave me up for dead, killed by one of those murdering bands of agitated Muslims roaming the streets and the alleyways.

They wanted me to tell them what was happening and the terrible scenes I had presumably witnessed--and they were visibly baffled to learn that I was not even aware of the looting, killing, and raping that were taking place. I kept my cool, told them not to

panic, and went to bed. But even I could not help hearing the shots fired at a distance and even some of the shouts for help.

The next morning things worsened considerably as word spread among slum dwellers and members of displaced tribes that there was a lot to be gained by joining in the fracas. I remember watching from a window groups of men clearly from out of town and hardly knowing their way about carrying bundles of loot and streaming up and down that section of our alley that led to another alleyway. Where we lived was just two or three houses before the end of a blind alley, and ours was the only Jewish household there.

I do not remember the idea having crossed the mind of any inhabitant of our house that our Muslim neighbors would so much as touch us. The most skeptical and hysterical among us expressed fears that our neighbors would not interfere and just let the ferocious mobs do what they like with us.

They were wrong. Without even being approached, the three older sons of our aging neighbor--one of them a government official and one a student at some college or other--assured us we could rely on their protection. They were of good and well-established Baghdad family and as such they usually had some firearms. They kept watch but I don't think there was any attempt that day on the part of the mobs to attack our house, most probably because they were not even aware of the fact that Jews inhabited it.

What Actually Happened

What exactly happened on that fateful summer day in 1941 is now fairly well-known and documented. But the chain of events that had led to it, the motives, the blunders, the machinations, the failures, and the foibles that made the event possible and probably inevitable are not and will perhaps never become conclusively clear. Baghdad had fallen to the British and the government of Rashid `Ali was put to flight. Yet the British troops did not enter the city--and the results were disastrous for the Jews and greatly embarrassing both to Britain and to the pro-British regime that succeeded the rebel government.

Somerset de Chair, the British intelligence officer who was on the spot at the time, told the full story--or something approaching the full story--in his book The Golden Carpet. There he records that one of the officers with the troops asked him: "Why do our troops not go into Baghdad? They may already be looting. I know. There will be many people killed if our troops do not enter."

To which he, de Chair, replied: "This was my own view and the ways of the Foreign Office are beyond my comprehension. From the hour of the ceasefire their word had prevailed. Having fought our way, step by step, to the outskirts of the city, we must now cool our heels outside. It would apparently be lowering the dignity of our ally, the Regent, if he were seen to be supported on arrival by British bayonets."

Another interpretation was that Regent Abdul Ilah, acting on information from his friends and agents in the city, decided that the time was not quite propitious for his entry, in view of the strength of anti-British feeling and popular resentment against his own regime. According to this theory, the regent and his entourage, including strongman Nuri el-Sai'd, were hoping for--and indirectly encouraging--just the developments which took place.

The advantages of this tactic were seen as self-evident. In the first place, the mob would vent its anger and resentment on a ready scapegoat, the Jews. Second, the new regime could make good use of the resulting general confusion in order to settle old accounts with the prorebel elements.

The psychological consequences that the farhud had on the Jews of Iraq, and its effects on their morale, were far-reaching. The Jews of Baghdad, the most influential and well-established single element in the city, were shocked, terrorized, and demoralized. In the long history of this community, indeed, no other event had been so traumatic. It could well be said that the mass exodus of 1950-1951, when almost all the Jews of Iraq were hurriedly transferred to Israel, was the end result of a process that had started on those two fateful days of June.

It was those events that made the Jews of Iraq receptive to Zionist teachings and ideology, an ideology that had failed to take root because most of them could not reconcile it with their seemingly complete integration into Baghdad life. For though the Zionist movement had made modest beginnings as early as the 1920s, and though it was known in Iraq even earlier than that, it was only after Rashid 'Ali's revolt and the anti-Jewish riots of 1941 that Zionism began to make real headway in Baghdad, especially in the ranks of the young.

There were, of course, other factors and pressures--notably the situation created by Iraq's participation in the Palestine conflict in 1948 and the defeat the Arabs suffered at the hands of the new state of Israel. But the events of 1941 were what really started off the cataclysmic process.

Following the entry of British troops, the majority of them Urdu-speaking Indians, residents of respectable neighborhoods became so annoyed with the harassments of these sex-hungry young males that many of them found it necessary to take some sort of action. They decided to put a huge sign at the entrance of each side street or alley reading *Aki Jana Man'a Yi*, Urdu for "No Prostitutes Here!"

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