

*Gabriel Warburg*

## NOTES ON THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN SUDAN IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

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When Muhammad Ahmad b. 'Abdallah proclaimed himself Mahdi (the Guided One) of the Sudan in June 1881, there were only eight Jewish families there, all of whom lived in Omdurman and all, except one, of Sephardi origin. The best known is Moses Ben-Sion (Coshti), son of Rabbi Mayer Bechor Coshti of Hebron. He was among the Jews and Christians who were compelled to convert to Islam during the Mahdiyya – the thirteen-year period of Islamic rule established by the Mahdi's conquest of Khartoum in 1885. In his *Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, Richard Hill wrote that Ben-Sion, known as Musa Basiyouni after his conversion to Islam, was entrusted by the Khalifa 'Abdullahi, the Mahdi's successor, with various confidential missions and became one of his financial advisers.<sup>1</sup> Basiyouni was not unique in taking on such a role; several European Christians who had

served in the Turco-Egyptian administration of Sudan, such as Rudolf von Slatin Pasha, converted to Islam and became associated with the Mahdist state.

As far as we know, this was the beginning of the small Jewish community of Sudan. We have hardly any written sources about this community, since, unlike the Jewish communities in other Muslim countries, a study of its history has not yet been undertaken. We have only scattered information about several better-known Sudanese Jewish families. The Basiyounis, for example, are the subject of an unpublished paper presented in 1996 at the Sudan Studies Association by Professor Robert Kramer.<sup>2</sup>

According to Kramer, Moses Ben-Sion, son of a Sephardi rabbi, was born in 1842 in Palestine (an alternative source names his birthplace as Izmir). With his Turkish-born wife, he migrated first to

Egypt and later to Sudan, where, by 1880, he was appointed agent of an Egyptian trading company. After his conversion to Islam, he and his family settled in the Masalma district of Omdurman. Kramer writes:

Life for Basiyouni in Mahdist Omdurman was not one of unremitting suffering. A confidant of the Khalifa Abdulla and a member of the Khalifa's informal advisory council ("al-'Ashara al-Kuram"), he was entrusted with the importation of Egyptian luxury goods through Sawakin. ... At the urging of the Khalifa, Basiyouni took a Sudanese wife by the name of Manna bt. [bint] Bishara, who bore him six children, four of whom survived childhood. ... After the Mahdiyya, Basiyouni retained his Ansari name but formally reverted to Judaism. A rabbi was summoned from



Rabbi Solomon Malka (1878–1949)  
Hakham of the Sudan and its Chief Rabbi



Hanna David Assouline Malka  
Rabbi Malka's wife

Alexandria to convert Sitt Manna, and Basiyouni remarried her according to Jewish practice.<sup>3</sup>

Much more information on the Jews of Sudan is to be found in the recent book by Eli Malka, *Jacob's Children in the Land of the Mahdi: Jews of the Sudan*, published in 1997 by Syracuse University Press. Eli Malka was born in Omdurman in 1909 and lived there until his emigration in 1964, first to Switzerland and later to the United States. His father, the late Rabbi Solomon (Shlomo) Malka, Chief Rabbi (*Hakham*) of Sudan from 1906 until 1949, left a manuscript in Hebrew on the early history of Sudan's Jews, which unfortunately was lost. However, Eli Malka was able to gather information for his book from Sudanese Jewish community leaders whom he interviewed in the United States, England, Israel and Switzerland, as well as from his own recollections. In addition, we now have a collection of speeches and memoirs by Rabbi Solomon Malka, compiled by his

son David S. Malka and published by Book-Mart Press in 1999.

Following the Anglo-Egyptian conquest of Sudan in 1896–1898, most of the Jewish families that had converted to Islam during the Mahdiyya returned to Judaism, and the men who had married non-Jewish wives had them and their children converted to Judaism. However, according to the evidence presented to Kramer, many of these Jews remained in the Massalma district of Omdurman and retained their Muslim names. Some of them, such as the Mandeels, the Isra'ilis and the Hakims, remained Muslims. This did not prevent them from maintaining close, friendly relations with Jews like the Basiyounis, who had reverted to Judaism following the end of the Mahdiyya. According to Yusuf Bedri, a well-known Sudanese intellectual and educator, "people didn't strongly distinguish between Muslims, Christians and Jews, since all dressed alike and visited and ate together on Fridays."<sup>4</sup>

After the re-conquest of the

Sudan by the Anglo-Egyptian army, these early "Mahdiyya Jews," as they were known in Sudan, were joined by additional Jewish families who arrived primarily from Egypt and Palestine, laying the foundation for Sudan's Jewish community. In 1908 the community elected Musa Basiyouni as its president for life, a post he held until his death in 1917. The Basiyouni family remained in Sudan and its members continued to play an important role in the country's educational and intellectual life until the early 1970s, when the Jewish community ceased to exist.

There was no synagogue in the early years, and Jewish services were held in rented premises until 1926. During the presidency of Joseph Forti (1921–1926), the community purchased a small plot of land on Victoria Avenue, later renamed Kasr Avenue, and built a spacious synagogue there. The Jewish community reached its peak in the 1930s and 1940s, when it numbered some 800–1,000 members. This still made it a very small



Interior of the Khartoum synagogue, showing the *teba* (reader's desk).



Interior of the Khartoum synagogue, showing the *Heikhal* (Holy Ark).

community compared with those of Egypt, Iraq or North Africa. However, as offers of government and other posts attracted young Jews to Sudan, primarily from Egypt, the newly built synagogue was filled to capacity. Jews arrived in Khartoum from all over Sudan for High Holiday services, making the synagogue the center of the country's Jewish communal and religious life.<sup>5</sup> The community also built a Jewish recreation and sports center. The young Jews of Khartoum and Omdurman soon competed at soccer, tennis and other sports and established the Sudan Maccabi sports club.

The Jews enjoyed a peaceful and prosperous life. Many of the more prominent ones, together with well-to-do members of other minorities, lived in Khartoum's luxurious neighborhoods, where they owned spacious villas and frequented their neighborhood clubs. Most had Sudanese-Muslim friends with whom they socialized on a regular basis. Jews filled a number of important positions in the Sudanese administration and

economy. Among the many institutions mentioned by Eli Malka as having Jewish officials are the Khedival Mail Line, which had a Jewish manager, the Sudan Government Post Office, the National Bank of Egypt and the Sudan Government Passport Office.<sup>6</sup> Jews owned or were agents of important Sudanese, Egyptian, or European commercial companies. They also excelled as doctors, lawyers, opticians and university lecturers. For example, Dr. Suleiman Basiyouni, son of Ben-Sion Koshti, was chief surgeon at the Sudan Government Khartoum Hospital and professor at the Khartoum University School of Medicine. Even the owners of the popular Gordon Music Hall in Khartoum, Jimmy and Trudy Kane, were Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. What is especially surprising is the number of prominent Jews, such as Nissim Gaon, Leon Tammam, and the Dweik and Malka families, who started their careers rather humbly in Sudan and subsequently achieved world renown as businessmen and phil-

anthropists (Malka, pp. 134–146).

Jews started leaving Sudan after its independence in 1956. According to Malka, this was primarily a result of the 1956 Suez war and the Arab-Israeli conflict and had little to do with the policy of Sudan's independent governments, which showed no special animosity towards the Jews (Malka, p. 125). The last president of the Jewish Community in Sudan was Ishag Mousa El-Eini, the Sudan-born son of Mousa Israel El-Eini. He was elected to the post in 1965 and served until 1970, when he departed for England. By then, in the aftermath of the Six Day War, hardly any Jews remained in Sudan (Malka, p. 60).

Eli Malka's account is devoted primarily to his own life and that of his family and thus relies mainly on his own recollections, as one of the few surviving eyewitnesses of the community's history. His father, Rabbi Solomon Malka, was born in Morocco in 1878 and immigrated to Palestine when he was twenty years old. He studied in

Safed and Tiberias, where he received his rabbinic ordination. In 1906 he was sent to Omdurman by Rabbi Eliahu Chazan, then Hakham Bashi of Alexandria. Rabbi Solomon regularly published his sermons in *al-Shams*, an Arabic-language Jewish newspaper published in Cairo. They were later collected into a volume and published under the title *Al-mukhtar fi tafsir al-thawra bi-kalam al-hakham Salmon Malka* (Cairo 1949).

Eli Malka received his early education in the Catholic Missionary schools in Omdurman and Khartoum. He completed his secondary education at the Church Missionary Society English Boys Boarding School in Cairo and received degrees in commerce and mercantile law from Comboni College in Khartoum and Wolsey Hall, Oxford University. He was thus primarily a product of English Christian education, and it is not surprising that he joined the British-founded Sudan Cultural Center upon his graduation from Oxford. However, he remained an observant Jew and a leader of the Sudan Jewish community, both in Sudan and in exile.

Malka's business career, which began in 1928, was centered on the famous Gellatly Hankey Company, the leading British international company in Sudan and the surrounding regions. Established in London in 1862, it opened its first branches on the Red Sea during the Mahdiyya, in the 1880s, in Sawakin on the Sudan side and Jeddah on the Arabian side. In 1953 Eli Malka became head of the newly founded Gellatly Trading Company of Sudan, with branches in many Sudanese towns as well as in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Cairo. It became one of the most



Gellatly Headquarters, Khartoum.

important import-export trading companies in the Sudan, with departments covering every aspect of Sudan's foreign trade (Malka, p. 158). The Gellatly Group of companies in Sudan was nationalized by President Ja'far al-Numeiri in 1972, during the period of "Sudanese Socialism," and was renamed the "May Trading Company" in commemoration of the revolution that swept Numeiri and his Free Officers to power in May 1969. Malka had left the company five years earlier, when his wife's medical treatment in London required the family to leave Khartoum.

In his capacity as director of Gellatly Trading Company, Malka travelled all over Sudan and to many neighboring countries, where he visited the company's branches and trading associates. He describes one of his visits to Juba in southern Sudan, where "most of the shopkeepers were Northern Sudanese Muslim Arabs, but the population ... was primarily African Negro Blacks." On another occasion, in 1933, Malka traveled to the Nuba Mountains in southern Kordofan to meet his British managing director, Mr. Mcfarlane, and his wife. Though Malka went there especially in order to host the Mcfarlanes, the latter became the guests of the British District Commissioner, who took them to his house for the

night. "In classic British style," Malka tells us, "we were excluded from the Nuba General Assembly, which was held early in the morning entirely for the benefit of the British Community."

Thus, even the Anglophilic Eli Malka, educated and brought up on English traditions and culture and a senior manager in a British-owned firm, could not fail to notice that he, like all other "natives," was excluded from associating with his British superiors on such occasions. This is reminiscent of an account by Edward Atiyah, a Master at Gordon College in the 1920s and 1930s. In his memoir, *An Arab Tells His Story*, Atiyah relates how he was excluded from associating with British Masters at the college, though he was both a Christian and an Oxford graduate. He had lived with an English family at Oxford, but he could not mix with his colleagues in Sudan. He was especially embittered when, during a visit by the Governor General, all "native" staff members were ordered to remain in their Common Room and were excluded from the ceremony. Malka relates, however, that his father, the Hakham Bashi Solomon Malka, was invited to mix with British officialdom, along with fellow Muslim and Christian notables, on those occasions when the Governor General invited "native" community leaders to his palace.

Malka's description of a 1946 trip with his wife Dora to Erkowit, a summer resort built in the Red Sea Hills to enable British officials to escape the summer heat, illustrates the difference in this regard between British officialdom and Sudanese notables. At Erkowit, the Malkas were invited together with their Greek friend and family doc-

tor, John Papadam, to join Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi, leader of the Ansar sect, for his afternoon tea. Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman, the only surviving son of the Mahdi and at the time one of Sudan's leading entrepreneurs, had reassembled the Mahdist supporters in the Ansar movement after World War I. In 1945 he established the Umma party, which has remained a dominant element in Sudanese politics ever since. He was the most important Muslim leader in Sudan, and his gesture toward Papadam and the Malkas typifies the tolerant attitude of prominent Sudanese Muslim leaders toward the Jews and other minorities in northern Sudan. He went out of his way to be hospitable to non-Muslims, while the Anglo-Sudanese officials and businessmen had no inclination to socialize with them and snubbed them whenever possible.

The Jewish community in Sudan maintained close relations with the Jewish community in Egypt, where most of them had family ties. Since Malka's father was chief rabbi of Sudan, he was closely associated with Haim Nahum Effendi, Hakham Bashi of Egypt and the Sudan from 1925 to 1960, who had appointed him to his post. The Sudanese Jewish elite also had close connections with the Cattawi family, which presided over the Jewish community in Cairo until 1946, and with the Mosseri family, whose members were vice-presidents. The sons of Sudanese Jews were often sent to study in Egypt, both to further their Jewish education and to graduate from Victoria College.

Finally, a few words on the neighboring Jewish communities, with whom the Sudanese Jews

communicated on a regular basis. As director of Gellatly, Malka often visited Eritrea, Aden and Ethiopia. During these visits he became friendly with local Jewish families and always attended synagogue services. Upon attending prayers at the Asmara Synagogue on a Friday night, he was amused to find three Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews from Israel taking part in the Sephardi services and enthusiastically joining with other members of the congregation in singing the Adenese Yemenite melody for the hymn *Lekha Dodi*. He was also struck by the close relations between the Jewish communities in Addis Abbaba and Asmara and their non-Jewish neighbors. Jews from both Eritrea and Yemen used to pass through Khartoum *en route* to Jerusalem, where they were bound either as pilgrims or as settlers.

By the early 1970s, the former members of the small but flourishing Jewish community of Sudan were scattered in Europe, the United States and Israel. The sources we have at our disposal, including Eli Malka's book, completed in his 87th year, do not amount to a history of the Sudanese Jewish community. Rather, they constitute an indispensable source for historians of Jewish communities in Muslim states and for those interested in the role and fate of non-Muslim minorities under Muslim rule. The history of Sudan's small Jewish community has yet to be researched and written.

1. Richard Hill, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan?*, London 1967, p. 78
2. Robert S. Kramer, "The Death of Basiyouni: A Meditation on Race, Religion, and Identity in the Sudan," paper presented to the 15th Annual Meeting of the Sudan Studies Association, May 1996, Alexandria, Virginia. The following paragraphs, unless otherwise noted, are based on Dr. Kramer's paper with his kind permission.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 5. Rudolf von Slatin, who was also a confidante of the Khalifa following his surrender, did not mention his womenfolk in his memoirs. However, one of his fellow-prisoners told the story of Slatin's two wives, the first a Fur girl whom he brought with him when he surrendered to the Mahdi in December 1883, and the second an Abyssinian who bore him a child shortly after his escape from Omdurman in 1895 (Charles Neufeld, *A Prisoner of the Khaleefa*, London 1899, pp. 206–207).
4. Kramer, "The Death of Basiyouni" (above, note 2), p. 11, quoting his interview with Yusuf Bedri on June 30, 1987. According to Eli Malka, all the Jews reverted to Judaism after the end of the Mahdiyya and had their Muslim wives and children converted as well, with the exception of the Mandeel family, whose founder became a prominent Sudanese journalist. See Eli Malka, *Jacob's Children in the Land of the Mahdi: Jews of the Sudan*, White Plains, NY, 1997, pp. 16, 19–22.
5. In 1986, the few remaining Jews in Khartoum sold the synagogue to a commercial bank, and it was replaced by an office building (*ibid.*, p. 50).
6. It is of interest to note that Malka worked in the supply department of the Sudan Defence Force shortly after it was founded in 1925. However, though he mentions the assassination of Sir Lee Stack in November 1924 and the Allenby Ultimatum that followed, he does not associate these events with the founding of the SDF (*ibid.*, pp. 111 and 157).