



THE CALCUTTA JEWISH CONNECTION

1798 – 2022... * 5558 - 5782



...All that's left are a handful of Jews,
three Synagogues, two Schools, a Cemetery...
and a proud history to cherish.....



A Calcutta Jews...hope and vision

As the friendship of India and Israel continues to grow, and as the Jewish Community of Calcutta (Kolkata) begins to disappear, it is imperative to realize that its Synagogues are given its due respect and put in the hands of the rightful Jewish Organizations to preserve them for the reason they were built “prayer and gathering” and not to be portrayed only as a piece of art.

I look forward to seeing the Government of Israel and India take the initiative to work out a mutual agreement to permit the Jewish Community and the Government of Israel & India's choice of Organization from Israel or elsewhere take pride in keeping alive the Synagogues of Calcutta for future generations from all over the world and to remain a heritage in India. They were restored for this purpose.

Synagogues have always and must always be the center for Jewish communities in the Diaspora. It's what keeps us alive.

In 1798 it took one man to establish a community. I am sure that one day again a community can be established, to live in peaceful coexistence in Kolkata especially when it has to offer everything a community requires...

...three Synagogues, two Schools and a large cemetery. We have witnessed many Jews from different corners of the world come and make use of the Synagogues after restoration, and this is encouraging.

David R Ashkenazy



.... *Keeping the flame of Jewish presence in this part of the world
burning forever*

A BRIEF INSIGHT INTO THE CALCUTTA JEWISH COMMUNITY

1798 * 5558

The Jewish community in Calcutta, never very numerous – at its peak just after World War II it was estimated at some 5,000, and there are now only about 5 - 10 practicing the Jewish faith. The rich heritage of the Jews of the past till the 70's has undoubtedly become an integral part of the economic and cultural history of Calcutta, as well as of the nation.

Shalom Aaron Obadiah Cohen the first Jew to decide to settle in Calcutta arrived on 3rd August 1798 (21st Av 5558) and established a community.

Shalom Aaron Obadiah Cohen

Birthdate: circa 1762

Birthplace: Aleppo,

Mount Simeon, Aleppo Governorate, Syria
(Syrian Arab Republic)

Death: February 13, 1836

Buried in Calcutta (Kolkata), West Bengal, India

Immediate Family:

Son of: Aaron Obadiah Cohen & Hana Dayan Cohen

Husband of Seti Cohen and Simha Najimah Cohen

Father of Rebecca Duek Cohen; Rachel Duek Cohen; Lunah Duek Cohen; Rachel Cohen; Raphael Joseph Hayim Joseph Cohen; David Shalom Cohen; Seti Duek Cohen; Aaron Shalom Cohen; Khatoon Duek Cohen; Moses Shalom Cohen and Sarah Duek Cohen - Cohen

(Geni.com)

There were other Jews who had earlier passed through Calcutta for trade, but Shalom Cohen was the first to establish residence here, and with his family and retainers, he along with families from Syria formed the nucleus of a Jewish settlement which grew into a thriving community of future Baghdadi Jews.

When Shalom Cohen left Aleppo in 1792, he travelled first to Surat, where he took a partner, Jacob ben Semah ben Nissim (Jacob Semah), and established trading operations which flourished. When Shalom's first wife, Seti, refused to join him in India, he married Jacob's sister Najima, later known as Seemah. Seti eventually did come to India in 1795; she gave birth to a daughter the following year and died shortly after. Her daughter was brought up by Seemah with her own children.

There had been Jewish traders in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea for centuries. It is speculated that Stephen al Goorji (i.e. the Georgian), Shalom's landlord in Surat, drew his attention to the flourishing and prosperous Armenian colony in Calcutta. Encouraged by this, Shalom travelled from Surat via Bombay, Cochin and Madras, which already had Jewish settlements.

Soon after his arrival he brought his second wife Najima and children to Calcutta and rented a spacious garden house in Canning Street.

Shalom Cohen's export business in Murshidabad silk, Dacca muslin, pepper and spices, indigo, saltpetre, precious stones, gold and silver, rice and coffee were a roaring success. While he travelled about the country to seek further trading opportunities, his business in Calcutta flourished under the care of his relatives. He also employed Jews from Cochin.

In the late 18th and early 19th century several Jews from towns in Syria, Iraq and Iran – Aleppo, Baghdad, Basra, Isfahan – came to India for trade, and many of them settled in Calcutta: we find the names of Cohen, Duek Cohen, Lanyado, Ezra, Arakie, Gubbay and several others in the early records of the community. They were Baghdadi Jews and constituted the bulk of the Jewish population in Calcutta. In the 1820's the misrule of Daud Pasha in Baghdad further fuelled Jewish emigration, and several poorer families joined the community at this time.

After the death of Shalom Cohen, his son-in-law Moses Simon Duek Cohen of Spanish descent, came to Calcutta in 1805 at the age of 19 and became the head of the community. The large family, connected by marriage to several other great trading families, continued to prosper. By this time Jewish traders had established themselves in several mofussil towns like Monghyr, Dinapore, Bhagalpur, Gorakhpur and Rajshahi. Rangoon, Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai, which were important trading hubs in the network that spanned the entire Orient, also had their quota of Jewish entrepreneurs, some of whom rose to great eminence.

Moses Simon Duek Cohen (1786-1861) was the first President of Calcutta's Jewish community as well as the leader of religious services and Mohel (performer of ritual circumcision). His grandson, the most rev Elias Moses Duek Cohen a prominent businessman, was also a community and religious leader at Neveh Shalom Synagogue from 1873 and at Magen David Synagogue from 1883-84 to 1927. Interestingly about 20 direct and indirect descendants of the Duek Cohen family of Calcutta from all over the world visited Calcutta a few years ago and were welcomed by the only remaining direct descendant and his son, of the Duek Cohen family in Calcutta.

The Synagogues of Calcutta

The Jews of Calcutta held their prayer meetings at the house of Shalom Cohen. A second prayer hall was located at a rented house in Amratola, which later moved to a house known as "Khan Hajji Masuda" on Ezra Street. In 1825 a large house at 5, Suktikhatta, was purchased by him for a sum of Rs.16,000/- and consecrated as a Synagogue, "Neveh Shalome". This building was later dismantled to make room for the construction of Magen David Synagogue; Neveh Shalome Synagogue was rebuilt on an adjacent plot of land in 1911, was renovated by the community in 2014, and has been used for services during the restoration of the two main Synagogues.

Calcutta's two main Synagogues are the beautiful "Beth El" on Pollock Street, built in 1856, and "Maghen David" off Brabourne Road, built in 1883-84 and acknowledged to be

the largest and most magnificent Synagogue in the East. Ownership of the synagogues remains with the Jewish community represented by the Hon Secretary and the Board of Manhigim.

Other privately owned prayer halls were Maghen Aboth on Blackburn Lane, and Shaare Rasone on Sudder Street, which no longer exist.

The Jewish Cemetery of Calcutta

On 23rd February 1836 Shalom Cohen died at the age of 73 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Narkeldanga. This cemetery was established on land given by a friend of Shalom Cohen's in 1812, when a visitor from Palestine died in Calcutta and the community had no place to bury him. Shalom Cohen went to his friend, a princely Muslim landowner, and told him of the difficulty. His friend immediately offered him a piece of land in Narkeldanga. Unwilling to take it free, Shalom Cohen pulled a ruby ring off his finger and insisted that the prince accept it in exchange. The original land was added to several times as the community grew. The Oseh Haised - Jewish Burial Board takes care of all burial arrangements.

The cemetery, which has some 4,000 adult graves, had fallen into disrepair and in April 2016 the Board of Manhigims decided that the graves be repaired and painted, inscriptions on headstones have been restored wherever possible, and a full physical verification of graves has been carried out. The Cemetery today has been beautified and a memorial garden will be taken up.

The Jewish Schools of Calcutta

As the community grew and prospered in the second half of the 19th century, it became increasingly conscious of the need for its own schools. The Jewish Girls' School, intended for girls and little boys, was established in January 1881 on Ezra Street by Moses de Jacob Abeasis, an immigrant from Tunis and Malta. The object of the school was to inculcate "a thorough knowledge of Hebrew religious principles together with a plain English education". On the first day there were 18 pupils, but in little over a year the number rose to 108. Children from poor families were educated free of charge and provided with books, stationery, and lunch.

In 1884 the school moved to more spacious premises on Pollock Street, and by 1929 it was able to construct its own building opposite Beth-El Synagogue, which was later rented to the Post Office and thereafter sold. The Jewish Girls' School was classified as European in 1894. In 1937 the Jewish Women's League set up a Jewish Girls' Hostel, which eventually became the boarding department of the Jewish Girls' School. The school moved to its present home at 63, Park Street in 1955-56. Miss Duffin was the first Headmistress of the school, and the last Jewish Principal was Miss Ramah Luddy, who held that responsibility for nearly 30 years until 1963. The Girls' School now has about 1,500 students and produces excellent results every year. The Board of Management some years ago decided that the 4 house teams of the School will be called Luddy, Ezra, Cohen and Gubbay in honor of their contribution to the development of the School.

In November 1882 Elia Ezra, son of David Joseph Ezra, started the “Tehilla-le-David”, later known as the “Ezras’ Benevolent Institution”, to provide education to the sons of poor Jewish parents. Hebrew and the Torah, translated into Arabic, were taught in the school along with secular subjects.

After the death of Elia Ezra, the community took up the responsibility of this school, which later came to be known as the “Talmud Torah Institution”. In May 1909 the school moved to rented premises at 45, Bowbazar Street. A generous donation by Elias Meyer, the President of the school, helped build its present premises in 1925. It is now called the “Elias Meyer Free School and Talmud Torah”.

Calcutta’s Hebrew Press: was founded in 1840 by Eleazar ben Aaron Saadiah Iraqi ha-Cohen and continued until 1856. A scholar and poet, Iraqi was an expert printer who probably cast his own type. The products of his press, some of them his own writings, are comparable with the best European productions of the time. Another press, operated by Ezekiel ben Saliman Hanin from 1871–93, printed the Judeo-Arabic weekly in Hebrew type Mevasser from 1873–78. This paper was followed by Perah (1878–88), printed from 1871 by Elijah b. Moses Duwayk ha-Cohen. Two further weeklies, Maggid Meisharim (1889–1900) and Shoshannah (1901), were edited and printed by R. Solomon Twena, author of almost 70 works published by his own press.

The birth of Israel after World War II brought about a change in the exclusive Jewish character of both the Jewish Boys’ and Girls’ Schools. Mass emigration considerably reduced the number of Jewish pupils, and the school authorities decided to admit non-Jewish students. At present there is not a single Jewish student or Jewish staff in either the Girls’ or Boys’ School. Both schools have been upgraded to the Higher Secondary level in recent times and they provide a good English-medium education to the children of Calcutta, irrespective of caste or creed.

A M Cohen – Community Secretary, Secretary - Jewish Girls School

David R Ashkenazy – President Beth El, Hon Secretary – Maghen David, Board Member Neveh Shalom

Some of the builders of the Calcutta Jewish Community



Calcutta
Jewish families
...through the
years



Calcutta Jewish

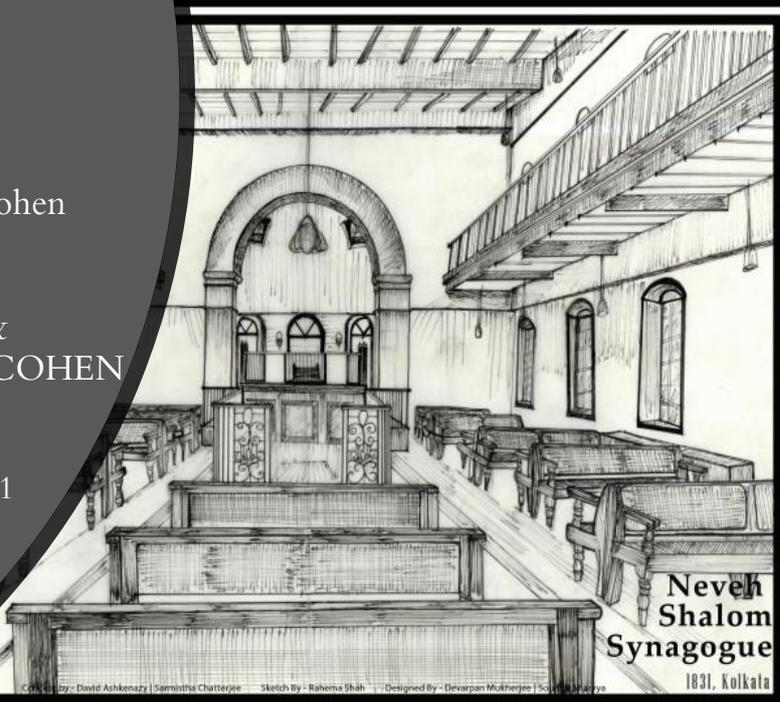
Existing Institutions

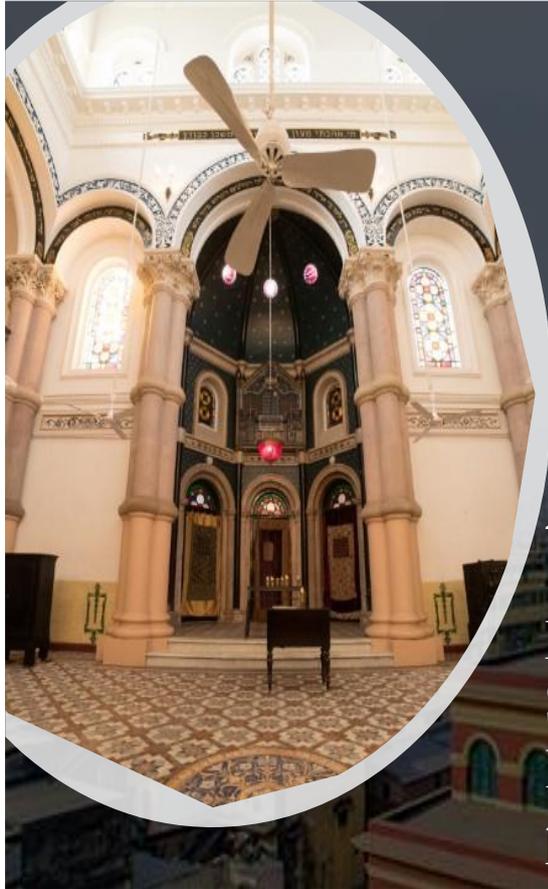


NEVEH SHALOM
previously the
OLD HOUSE
of Shalom A. Obadiah Cohen

built by:
EZEIKEL JUDAH &
SHALOME A. OBADIAH COHEN

FIRST BUILT IN 1831
REBUILT 1910- 12
RENOVATED- 2014





*The foundation stone for the Maghen David was laid on the 2nd of
January 1883.*

MAGHEN DAVID SYNAGOGUE

1884 – 2020

Built By:

Sir Elias David Ezra (1871 – 1947)

Restored: 2015 – 2017

photographs – after restoration

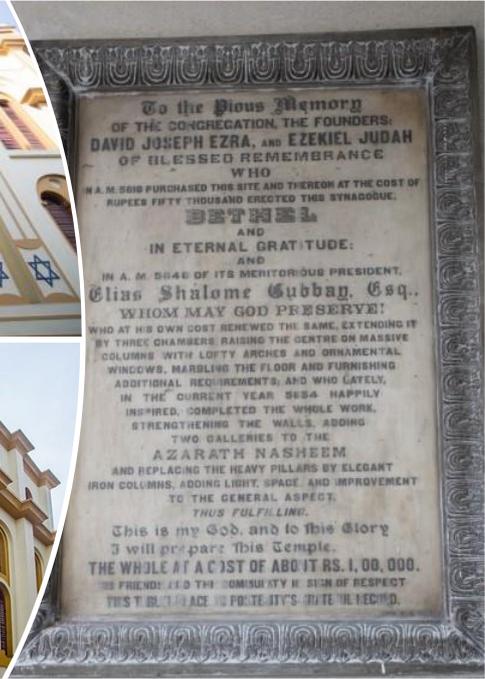


BETH EL SYNAGOGUE 1856 – 2020

In 1856 the Synagogue was built by David Joseph Ezra & Ezekiel Judah and later restored & expanded by Elias Shalome Gubbay in 1885 -1886.

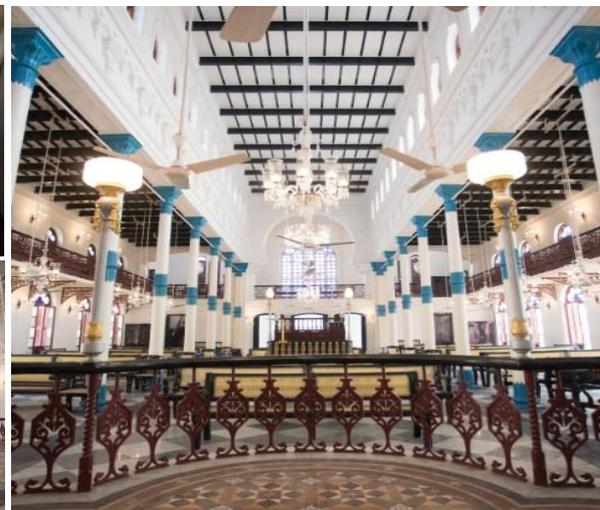
Restored: 2015 – 2017

PICTURES AFTER RESTORATION



“Beth El has a Mikveh that was built in 1953. It housed our very own kadus production (Wine) for the Community and a Clay Oven for baking of matzos for Pesach.”

“The exterior of the Synagogue is somewhat plain with Italian and Byzantine influences Beautiful stained glass may be seen on windows and high panels while stunning chandeliers may be seen hanging from the ceiling.”



Contribution of the Jewish Community to Calcutta

Calcutta Jewry played a significant role in the economic development of Bengal. The majority of the early Jewish settlers were traders by profession, and the strategic and geographic position of Calcutta offered them new avenues of trade in Murshidabad silk, Dacca muslin, pepper and spices, opium, indigo, saltpetre, precious stones, gold and silver, rice and coffee. Many Jews amassed considerable wealth and enjoyed a high social status.

In the early 20th century Jews became well established in the booming real estate business in Calcutta. The names of Ezra, Cohen, Mordecai, Elias, Gubbay, Curlender and others were well known in commercial circles. Elia Ezra was a Magistrate of the City Civil Court and was Sheriff of Calcutta in 1879. The first woman to practice law in the Calcutta High Court was a Jewess, Mrs. Rachel Ashkenazi, who represented the interests of purdanashin women.

No Jews in the recent history of Calcutta commanded such respect as Sir David Ezra and Benjamin Nissim Elias. Sir David Ezra was a director of several companies, besides being proprietor of the vast Ezra estates. The Ezras owned some of the most imposing buildings in Calcutta: Chowringhee Mansion, Esplanade Mansion, Ezra Mansion, Ezra Terrace etc. come to mind. Another Jewish property was the aptly named Bamboo Villa, which now houses Income-Tax offices!

Benjamin Nissim Elias, who began his life as an obscure trader, became one of Calcutta's wealthiest and most famous businessmen. His company, B.N. Elias & Co. Ltd., was the largest Jewish company in the East. His business empire included jute and tobacco, real estate, a dairy and the supply of electricity to mofussil towns.

Another famous son of Calcutta is Lt. General J.F.R. "Jackie" Jacob, who was largely responsible for the successful outcome of the war for the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. He went on to become G.O.C.-in-C., Eastern Command, and was later the Governor of Goa and then of the Punjab.

When the community was in its heyday, the Jews of Calcutta established several social and cultural clubs and associations. The need for organized social welfare and charity led to the formation of the Jewish Women's League in 1913. Adult female members of the community were members of this League. Funds were raised by organizing cultural programs, to give a monthly allowance to poor Jews and free tiffin to the poor children attending the Jewish schools. During Jewish religious festivals, the League distributed food and clothes among the indigent. Miss Ramah Musleah, the grand old lady of the community, used to be its secretary. Miss Musleah, who died at the age of 98, was also a teacher of the Jewish Girls' School for nearly 50 years.

The Jewish Association of Calcutta was formed in 1921 to promote social welfare and upliftment within the community. All male members of the Jewish community above the age of 18 years were eligible for membership. The Association still exists today.

The Habonim Club was started in 1930 on the ground floor of 3, Madge Lane, a house belonging to Harry Morris, with the objective of inculcating a spirit of nationalism and to encourage local youth to migrate to Israel.

The Judean Club was established in May 1929, with Lady Ezra as its first President, at premises on Kyd Street. It later shifted to Madge Lane. Its aim was to provide a social and cultural center for young Jews, and it organized lectures, picnics, parties, dances etc.

The Maccabi Club (established in April 1951) and other similar groups were set up to promote sports and culture amongst the youth of the community. Badminton, table tennis, physical training, boxing, hockey and basketball were promoted by these Clubs, and inter-Club matches were held. They also organised debates, lectures, picnics, youth camps, and essay and elocution competitions.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 caused many Jews to emigrate to their Biblical homeland. Many gave up good jobs in Calcutta to go and help build the new State. Some also went to England, America, Australia and Canada.

A M Cohen – Community & Burial Board Secretary, Secretary - Jewish Girls School, Hon Secretary – Beth El, Neveh Shalom

The Urgent Restoration & Rededication of the Synagogues

There is something for everyone at the **Beth El Synagogue, Maghen David Synagogue and Neveh Shalom Synagogue in Calcutta**. Although we are a handful practising the faith in Calcutta, we never hesitate to say to all, come pray with us.

These hallowed houses of prayer witnessed moments of grandeur. Congregations with heads of houses, women and children, daily prayers, festivals, weddings, births, and passing's. Until the late 1960's/early 70's, the Synagogues decorated themselves in splendor, providing a religious and cultural focus for the community.

But, for nearly half a century these institutions began to fall into slumber and there was little or no prayer services, community gatherings and eventually no urge for maintenance and sincere care, but only superficial renovation that was undertaken with no regard for art and a vision for a future possible Jewish Community. With the heavy monsoon rains and underground water seepage into the structure, ceilings cracked, corners, pillars and walls faced collapse, floors and cellar roofs in the basement posed an imminent danger and had to be cordoned off. Intricate artwork was not noticeable and began to fade. The iron girders, wooden beams below the floors and ceiling supports all needed to be changed if especially Beth El Synagogue (Built in 1856) and Maghen David Synagogue (Built in 1884) was to survive.

Something had to be done and finally on a July afternoon in the year 2015, majority of the Community with a few against the idea decided that after years of lethargy and controversy, there was an urge to take up the challenge to restore the Synagogues to its original magnificence and preserve it for future.

December 17th, 2017 witnessed a historical moment in many lives. We had a Celebration with a large gathering from all over, for completing the two-year restoration and the re-dedication of Maghen David and Beth El Synagogue. A new Sefer Torah was bought from Jerusalem. Two old Sefer Torah's were repaired and now usable. In a sentence we can say, "...the Synagogue doors were open, once again."

Today, not only do we have a Rabbi (the last city Rabbi was in the early 60's) to conduct prayer but when we look at the restored Synagogue, we can only say, "it was a calling".

We thank God for letting us complete our duty, against all odds making it possible for future generations of Jews from all corners to worship here.

I dedicate the present restoration of this graceful house of worship to the collective memory of the thousands of Jews of Calcutta whose narratives and traditions were shared with this fair city, feasted in its history, culture, cuisine and walked its streets.

Initiating and witnessing non – Jews and most of all Jews with and without connection to Calcutta coming here from all over the world to pray since its rededication is just the beginning and an encouragement for many more to come from all corners of the world.

David R Ashkenazy: - Hony. Secretary – Maghen David Synagogue, Trustee and President - Beth El Synagogue, Member Board of Manhigim – Neveh Shalom

A Day that made History

DECEMBER 17th 2017
29TH KISLEV 5778

The Rededication Ceremony and Celebration

His excellency Mr. Daniel Carmon—the Ambassador of Israel to India honored the grand function, along with other dignitaries. Rabbi Rivkin from the Chabad in Bangalore conducted the prayers.



Beth El Synagogue



A day to remember...



Maghen David Synagogue Rededication & Celebration

*What we did to
keep the flame
burning*





Today's members of Calcutta's (Kolkata's) Jewish Community are very few that follow the faith and of those who have converted and married outside the community but were welcomed by Maghen David Synagogue to keep in touch with their roots. We have a sponsored Rabbi that comes often courtesy Star – K Kosher Certification. However, sadly today's dwindling community does not portray a pleasant picture of harmony and understanding as wished. But there is still hope in some of us that wish to find the path to reconciliation and unitedly preserve, safe – guard and build a new and bright future for others.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו, וצונו לעסוק בצרכי צבור

I am honoured to have shared with you a fraction of the rich, colourful, and historical culture of my once dynamic community.

David R Ashkenazy
david.ashkenazy@gmail.com
2022

