

Flower Silliman Interview – May 16, 2017 in Kolkata, India

Summary

- Born April 20, 1930 in Calcutta
- Grandparents came from different parts of Iraq and parents born in India
 - Maternal grandmother from village called Uzair, where tomb of Prophet Elijah is located
- Attended Jewish Girls School, taught to read and sing Hebrew and studied Torah
- Family “steeply imbibed in Torah”
- Mother was kindergarten teacher and father worked in port commission of Calcutta as a “measurer” of jute for shipping
- 2 brothers – 1 immigrated to England and 1 to Australia, both passed away
- Moved a lot in Calcutta along with the community as it moved from North to South Calcutta (although hers mainly moved from east to west)
 - Early Baghdadi Jewish community lived near the Maghen David Synagogue located on the crossroads of Brabourne Road (not named that yet) and Canning Street
- Born on Chittaranjan Avenue, Calcutta and in 30s-40s moved near New Market on Sutter Street in a “Jewish muhalla” (Jewish neighborhood)
 - Nearby the Judean Club
 - Later moved to Ripon Street
- Standard middle class family - all houses were 2-3 bedrooms, living room with piano
- Judaism “came out through your nose”
 - Jewish school, Jewish teachers, Jewish neighbors, Jewish club
 - Not encouraged to spend much time with non-Jewish friends – fear of assimilation and intermarriage
- Never remembered her parent going to dinner at Anglo Indian and Parsi neighbors’ homes
 - Kept Kosher and could not eat in non-Jewish households
- When went to college in 1946 at Lady Irwin College in Delhi, “didn’t care if I was in Timbucktu” as long as it was in a place where there were no Jews around
 - Director of the school was Hannah Sen, a Baghdadi Jewish woman who married a non-Jew
- College was the first time Flower had Indian friends other than her servants
 - When she came home from college wearing a salwar kameez, her mother was horrified
 - Flower was told to wear English clothes (dresses, etc.) but she did not understand why, if her mother switched from Iraqi dress to English dress, she could not switch from English dress to Indian dress
- Went to Lady Irwin for 3 years and got degree in teaching
 - It was a time of “mayhem” – independence, Partition killings in Bengal and Delhi, refugee wave from East Bengal and Punjab
 - Partition riots were “dramatic, disturbing, and cruel”

- Grandmothers spoke broken English and Hindustani, but mainly Arabic
 - Cousins who lived with grandmother spoke fluent Arabic but Flower only knows numbers, swear words, and foods in Arabic
 - When she went to Egypt and knew a bit of Arabic, she lied about being Jewish
- Flower knew nothing about situation of Jews in Europe until after 1945 when Jews were liberated from the camps
- Jews in India thought the concentration camps of Europe must be like the internment camps that were in India
 - Remembered a German boy who lived next door to his grandparents was interned at a camp in India
 - A Japanese man, the first she saw with a movie camera, was also interned in a camp – she and the other kids cried because their Japanese uncle with the fun camera was taken away
- Jews in India were not aware of the worsening situation of European Jews
 - Saw what was in Time or Life magazine
 - Knew of Kristallnacht and Herzl's Zionist movement
- All families were Zionist and had blue boxes to donate money to the Zionist cause
 - Were Zionist, but not enough to take them to Israel
 - Zionism was a "pipe dream"
- Age 8 or 9, had Jewish teacher from Israel who taught students Hebrew (Mr. and Mrs. Krager)
 - Krager left Germany before the war
 - Learned grammar and to write modern Hebrew
 - Mrs. Krager also planted Zionism into the children's brain
- A small group of Baghdadi Jews left for Israel in 1945-6
 - Some did not like life on the kibbutz and moved to the nascent Israeli cities and prospered
- Older generation felt Zionism was a "pipe dream" and did not have enough money to think of immigrating
 - Very wealthy Jews had huge industrial interests in Calcutta and no reason to leave
 - There were exceptions—Flower's grand aunt moved to Old City of Jerusalem and had to be dragged out when Jerusalem fell
- Baghdadis' dream was to send to their children to England, not Israel
- Family celebrated all of the major Jewish holidays with family
 - On Shavout (Festival of Harvest) ate Parantha-like bread and wheat halwa, which differed from American/European tradition of eating cheese
- Jewishness showed in the life they lived
 - Parents kept Shabbat, celebrated every week
 - Kids did not keep Shabbat, but were not allowed to go out with friends on Friday night until it was observed with family
- Leisure activities
 - Played badminton, basketball, table tennis at Judean Club and at schools

- Danced (jitterbug/jived) and had parties
- Non-Jews could come to Jews homes for parties
 - Jewish girls could not go to non-Jewish homes, but boys could because boys had more freedom in that day and age
 - Boys could date Anglo-India girls, but girls could not date Anglo-Indian boys
- Jews were politically neutral – to minor a community to take sides, but “more English than Indian”
- Many Indians also felt that British had done a lot for Indians, especially Anglo-Indians
- Shashi Tharoor’s new book, *In an Era of Darkness*, shows how disastrous British rule actually was for Indians
- In 1946-7 Jews felt that they would not do so well in an independent Indian
 - Worried that Hindi would become national language, and they did not speak Hindi
 - Frightened of losing their jobs and the unknown
- Flower and her husband remained in India but they were the “exception”
 - Her husband’s company firm went back a hundred years or so in India
- Reasons for Jews leaving
 - Indian Independence
 - Prior to independence, Jews also took advantage of open door policy between English and India for British Indians
 - American/British Jewish servicemen came to Calcutta and married Jewish girls, who then immigrated
 - Immigration to Israel
- Hannah Sen, the Baghdadi Jewish directress of Lady Irwin College, remembered smuggling Jews in the boot of her car from Germany to Switzerland
 - Baghdadi Jews were aware of a bad situation for Jews in Europe, but not aware of the horrific extent of the situation
- Refugees began coming into Calcutta before Kristallnacht but there was a trickling of refugees of through the war
- Tells the story that she heard firsthand from Bolek Rembaum, a refugee to Calcutta who Flower knew personally:
 - Bolek was 17 or 18 and active in the Polish underground, when he came home to see his parents and siblings being rounded up by the Nazis. He made eye contact with his father and his father said “go.” Bolek left with a group of 11 or 12 men from the Polish Underground and traveled across Europe and Asia, ending up in Japan. This was 1938 or so, before Japan entered the war, so the men were very well-received. The men were told that they needed to leave Japan right before it joined the Axis. The oceans were mined so their ship was forced to dock in Calcutta. The men knew no English and found “Judean Club” in a telephone book, phoned the institution and got the secretary, who brought all the men to the Club. They were sent to homes of wealthy Jews, found jobs, and lived through the war.

- Menachem Savidor was one of the 11 men, and after the war, went to Israel and became speaker of the Israeli Knesset from 1981-84
- Bolek Rembaum married a Jewish girl from Calcutta and they immigrated to Australia and to Israel, but came back and died in Calcutta in the 1980s. His daughter, Linda Rivkind Rembaum, lives in Israel, and worked in the Israeli press office.
- The book *There were the Pepper Grows* tells the same story
- Many European Jewish refugees were doctors and the Baghdadi Jewish community went to them
- Tells the story of the Traub family:
 - One day, Flower took Mrs. Rachel Traub to see the movie “Sophie’s Choice” and Mrs. Traub fainted. Later Flower learned that Dr. Traub had gone from Lithuania to England to study dentistry, and when he was through, he was supposed to go back to Lithuania and be married to Rachel. Before returning to Lithuania, he bought a ship ticket to travel East. Along the way he met tea planters, and followed him to Shillong, India. Leo fell in love with Shillong and realized that there was a market for dentistry there. He phoned Rachel in Lithuania to tell her to join him in Bombay where they could get married in a Jewish synagogue by a Rabbi, and then move to Shillong. In 1937 or 1938, when the situation was worsening in Europe, the Traubs returned to Lithuania with their two children. They tried to convince their family to go to Shillong and escape the war, but their family wouldn’t leave, so they returned to India without them. The Jewish people in their Lithuanian village were forced to dig their own trench, lined up, and shot. Rachel Traub felt guilty all of her life for being saved, while her family was murdered. George Traub, the son, became a dentist in Calcutta
- The refugees were totally integrated into the Baghdadi community and were very happy in India
- Although Baghdadi community was Sephardic and the Europeans were Ashkenazi, it did not matter much
- The refugees and the American and Jewish servicemen affected Flower greatly
 - She saw matzo in a box for the first time and heard Jews speaking Hebrew with a funny accent
 - She knew there were Jews in other parts of the world, but had never experienced this difference firsthand
- Out of the 11 men in Bolek’s group, Bruno Weiss married a Baghdadi Jewish girl and went to Australia
 - It was also common for Jewish girls to marry American and British Jewish GIs
 - The girls assimilated to their given societies and their families often joined them
 - Flower herself was too young to hang out with the GIs, but they were very attractive
- Baghdadi Jewish women were attracted to the Jewish servicemen but also the idea of going to Britain and America
 - “a Cinderella story”

- Refugees were doctors, musicians, painters
- In 1944 or 1945, when Flower was 14 or 15, there were 2 Jewish chaplains (an American - David Seligson and British -Chaplain Bloch)
 - Chaplains arranged a Yom Kippur service in the Calcutta skating rink
 - Any Jewish servicemen in the “Eastern Command” (Afghanistan to Burma, and China to Colombo) were to be flown to Calcutta for the service
 - 1-2,000 Jewish servicemen included Calcutta’s Jewish community
 - It struck her as how similar the Jews were, yet different
- Around that time, there was a ceremony in the Maghen David Synagogue that over 3,000 Jews attended
- Both ceremonies were “breathtaking” and “opened her eyes as a teenager” to the fact that there were Jews from all over, and yet, they were like family
 - “Much more in common than different”
- Flower was close to Palestine long before, and was attracted to Palestine if not for her husband’s job in Calcutta
 - Given a choice, even today, she would leave everything and go to Israel
- When she went to Israel for the first time in 1975-6, she felt a “déjà vu”
- Flower lived on Sutter Street in Calcutta throughout the war
- The refugees were easily assimilated and did not put any economic strain on the community
- Seeing the Bengal Famine of 1942 and the Hindu-Muslim riots did not make the Jewish community feel very good with the idea of an independent India
 - Compared to Palestine and Israel conflict
- When she was 15-17, she observed Partition violence
 - Trains traveling from Punjab to Delhi with bloody bodies falling out of them
 - Her family’s “dhobi” (washerman) did not bring them their clothes from the “ghat” (river). When they asked why, he said that he could not go alone lest he be killed. Flower, her cousin, her brother, and the dhobi went in a jeep to get the clothes, because the Jews had no threat of violence. On the way, they saw a heavily pregnant woman with her stomach bared from her sari and a man with a knife about to kill her. They stopped the jeep and went to save, and Flower said: “don’t do this to this woman.” He responded: “Stay out of this, this is not your war. Go back to your car or we will kill you.” They had no choice but to leave. The situation still gives Flower nightmares to this day.
- In 1947 as a college student in Delhi, Air India announced that the community make chappati (bread) that would be airlifted to addresses where refugees were in need. There is a picture on the frontpage of *The Statesmen* of Flower and her peers making chappatis on the basketball court of the college. Hundreds of sacks of chappatis were airlifted to Delhi and Amitsar (Punjab).
 - This humanitarian effort was run by the Indian government and the Air Force
- In Delhi at Independence in 1947
 - Met Gandhi personally many times
 - Went to Gandhi’s house on his birthday every year

- Received diploma from the last Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten
 - Received other diploma from 1st Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru
 - She saw Kamala Nehru (wife of Jawaharlal Nehru)
- Lady Irwin College was affiliated with the Indian Independence Movement
 - It “made her more Indian”
 - She sang slogans of “quit India” – her parents would have been surprised
- Pre-Partition in 1946, Irwin was one of the only place for the Indian National Congress members to congregate
 - Experienced excitement the first time she saw the leaders, but it soon became the norm
- There was only one other Jewish girl at her college
 - Flower wanted to go to Miranda House in Lucknow, but there were no Jews there
 - She promised she would remain Kosher, but she ate everything
- Flower learned to eat on the floor like Indians and learned the prayers of different communities like Sikhs and Hindus
- She played piano for the Christian choir
 - Gandhi had her choir sing at his prayer meetings in his favorite style
- The day Gandhi died (January 31, 1948), Flower was on her way to his prayer meeting when the British information van pull up to the college to show a new film. She decided to turn back and see the film, because she hadn’t missed a prayer meeting in the last 8 days (Gandhi had been fasting and holding meetings every day for the past week or so). She had barely gotten to the auditorium to see the film when there was an announcement that Gandhi had been shot, and a few minutes later, that he had been killed. Flower “feared to think what would have happened” if she had gone, because she always sat 10 or so yards away from him. She is very glad she didn’t go that day, because she would have had nightmares the rest of her life.
- Pamela Mountbatten, the teenage daughter of Viceroy Mountbatten, used to come and visit the girls of Lady Irwin College in the evenings
 - Pamela veered more towards the Westernized girls like Flower
 - Went to her birthday party at Viceregal Lodge where Viceroy Mountbatten stopped by to say hello
 - Pamela gossiped about Queen Elizabeth’s 1948 wedding and saw the snapshots of the wedding on a “brownie camera” that Pamela had taken
 - Flower has a picture with Pamela in which they are both wearing saris
- Reflects on the power of the Holocaust museums that she has visited
- It strikes Flower that if she had been in Europe, she would have been one of those affected by the Holocaust. She feels guilt that Rachel Traub felt:
 - “Why were we in India...as Jews...spared? And why were these Jews specially martyred? It always makes me feel angry with God...not angry...But it always makes me question why we were given this wonderful life as children, and these children, like Anne Frank and others, were traumatized and killed and used as experiments.”

<http://collections.ushmm.org>

Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection