

# The *Mix*

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A Potpourri of Encounters and Impressions



## Manila Envelope

Until now, our Jewish association with the Philippines had primarily been the tens of thousands of “Filipinim” who devotedly care for many of Israel’s elderly. But after davening Shacharis in Manila’s daily minyan and meeting the rabbi whose Shabbos get-togethers and dedicated service are holding this tiny community together, we unsealed a Southeast Asian treasure



# Good Morning, Manila



Hopping a cab to a morning minyan after an overnight flight is pretty common these days — especially if you're flying into JFK, Newark, or Ben Gurion. But it can even happen in Manila, as we discovered when we landed just before 6 a.m., jumped into a metered cab, and found a vibrant, heterogeneous minyan in the Philippine capital's synagogue.

For most Jews living in Israel, at least, the Philippines conjures up an immediate association — the thousands of “Filipinos” who devotedly care for many of Israel's elderly. They're part of the Southeast Asian country's huge diaspora: About ten million Filipinos — or about ten percent of the residents of this country made up of 7,600 islands in the western Pacific Ocean — have left to find work abroad and send money back home. Locals explained to us that this is due to difficult economic circumstances in the large cities. Wages are low — many of the better-off people we met told us they have full-time help for the legal minimum wage of a mere \$150 per month. And even for those gainfully employed, commuting times are long because of the horrendous traffic — it took about an hour to travel just a few miles from the airport to the shul. We were afraid to look at the ticking meter, but in the end, it was much less than we'd expected — the hour-long ride cost about \$10.

Although anti-Semitism is not an issue in Manila, there is still a large fence with security cameras around the shul and an armed guard protecting the Jewish complex. After convincing the security guards to open the tall metal gate of the shul courtyard to us strangers, we make our way into the surprising bustle of activity inside the shul. The building complex is a full-service religious center with a daily Shacharis minyan, a nursery with about 30 children aged one to five, a beis midrash with a well-stocked library, a mikveh, classrooms, the rabbi's dwelling, and a kosher kitchen that produces over 1,000 meals a week.



Rabbi Azaria and Ari Z. are all smiles as they discuss the growth of a kehillah many thought was finished. Today, the rabbi and his rebbetzin host up to a hundred people at a Shabbos meal

## First, the Kiddush

**T**he shul has a membership of about 130 families today, but it hasn't always been this active. Although a new synagogue/community center was built in the 1980s, by the early 2000s things were looking down for the Manila Jewish community. With only about 35 members, some were preparing an obituary for the dwindling community. But it was premature. A new young rabbi was brought in and he and his rebbetzin got to work.

Rabbi Eliyahu Azaria is a native of Chicago who studied in the Midrash Sepharadi in the Old City of Jerusalem and in the Strauss-Amiel Program. At the same time, he trained to be a shochet, an invaluable skill when serving in an isolated community. In 2004, Rabbi Azaria, his wife Miriam, and their two daughters (three more children have subsequently been born in Manila) made the move to the Philippines. Thanks to Rabbi Azaria, the Manila community today has Chalak Bet Yosef beef, lamb, and kosher chicken. (The shechitah is done in a commercial plant in which he has worked out accommodations, while the salting is done in the shul basement.) He also works with a farm to supervise milk

and cheese production.

As the rabbi's residence is within the synagogue compound, when the Azarias arrived, they began with a Kiddush in their house following Friday evening services and again on Shabbos morning. These were both gastronomically and spiritually welcoming, and membership started to grow. The Kiddush, which evolved into full-fledged meals, soon had to be moved into the social hall, and now on an average Shabbos there can be as many as 100 people at the daytime seudah. It doesn't end with bentshing, either — many of the people stay around the shul the entire Shabbos afternoon schmoozing with their coreligionists, catching up on community news, and participating in Torah classes.

Rebbetzin Miriam, for her part, teaches many kids privately during the week and also leads a women's learning group for the mostly secularly highly educated but Jewishly less-educated women. She is also in charge of the shul mikveh and has seen a multi-fold increase in usage during her tenure.

The community is a heterogeneous mix — there are Americans and Israelis, *baalei teshuvah* and unaffiliated, and local converts. Many of them are either businessmen or involved in hi-tech.

# Way to the Heart

The recent growth of the shul, largely due to the efforts of Rabbi and Rebbetzin Azaria, was given its main boost by the kehillah's dedicated lay leader, Lee Blumenthal. Lee is a businessman who originally hails from New York but has spent the last 30 years in Manila. Although he has business obligations, his primary devotion is to the Jewish community. As we witnessed, he can be found many hours each day in the shul office having meetings, giving guidance, and just being around for whatever needs handling.

Rabbi Azaria and Lee have created various initiatives tailor-made for this community, a growing percentage of whom are secular Israelis who are less inclined to enter a shul. An Israeli woman named Moran Barber initiated a weekly lunch "shuk," for which the kitchen crew prepares falafel and other Israeli food for sale at the shuk, and set up tables with a large variety of Israeli canned and packaged food. At the shuk, Israeli ex-pats and others who otherwise might not visit a shul can still forge a connection with the community.

Another innovation, that relies on the tried-and-tested rule that food brings in people, is the breakfast after Shacharis. We, too, were invited, joined by just about everyone who had been at the minyan. It's been a daily event for several years, although the minyan-goers never seem to tire of it, and it helps ensure that remarkably, this small community actually has a daily minyan about 80 percent of the time.

**Businessman Lee Blumenthal (top) spends hours every day in the shul office, devising innovative outreach ideas; in Rebbetzin Miriam's gan (bottom), local Jewish children get their own taste of Shabbos; the daily Shacharis minyan (middle) is quite remarkable for a community of this size**



## Opportunity Calls

**J**ews have been living in the Philippines from as early as the 16th century, although the long arm of the Inquisition reached them as well. With Spain ruling over this conglomeration of far-away islands, it is known that at least eight Jews who lived there were convicted as Judaizers and sent to Mexico City for punishment. While these Anusim were caught, there were likely others who were not, and to this day in certain areas of the country, in particular the Mindanao region, there are individuals who claim descent from Anusim and some have family customs that would seem to support the assertion.

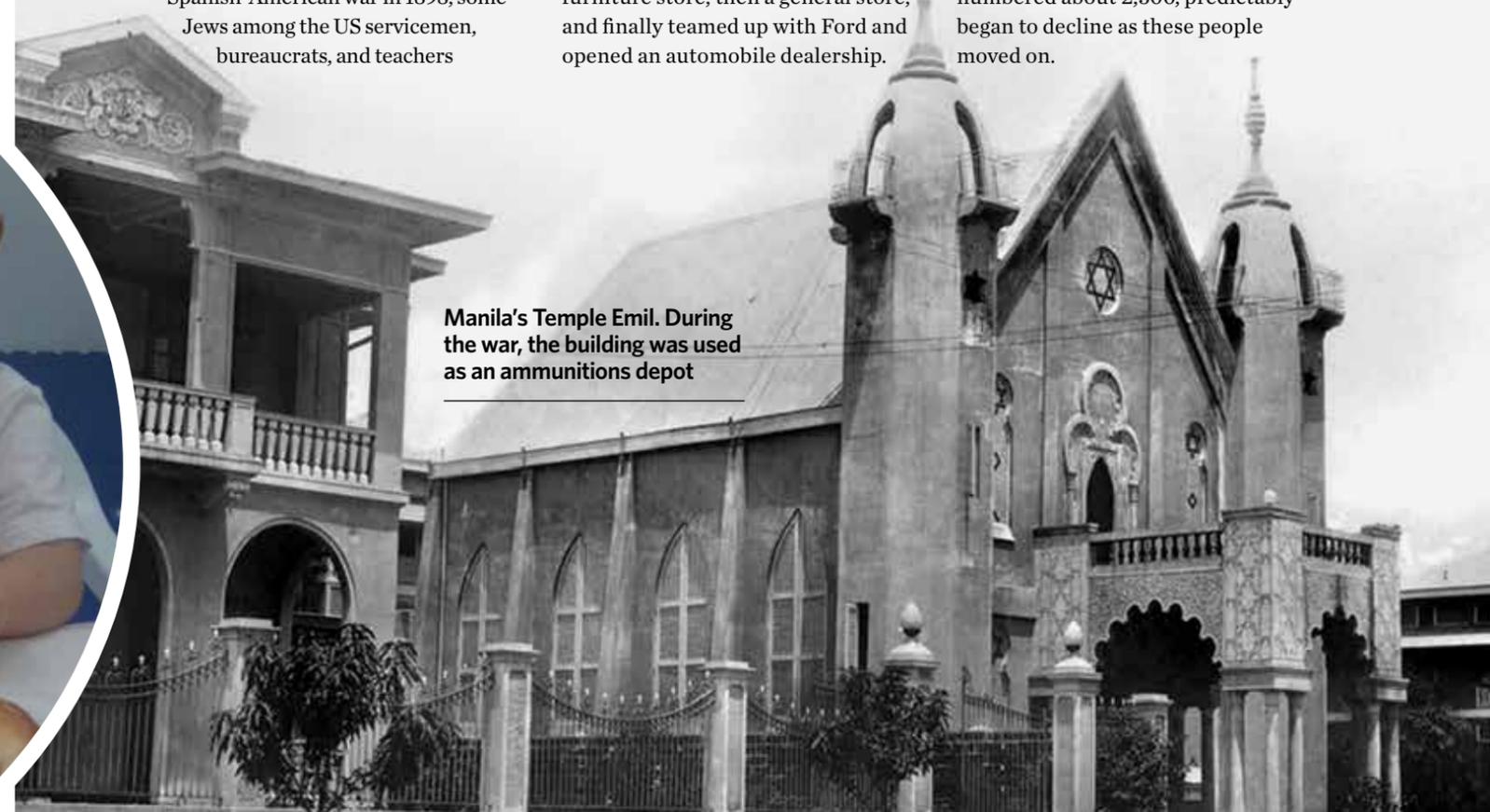
Spanish law didn't permit freedom of religion in the Philippines, but following the end of the 350-year Spanish occupation with the Spanish-American war in 1898, some Jews among the US servicemen, bureaucrats, and teachers

sent to the region decided to stay. Additionally, Jewish entrepreneurs saw an opportunity and some of them did spectacularly well, and at the same time, a small trickle of Sephardim from the disintegrating Ottoman Empire also joined the Jewish mix in Manila. For example, the three Levy brothers from Alsace opened a trading company that introduced the first bicycle, phonograph, moving pictures, and automobile to the island. They later expanded to become the primary jewelry business in the Philippines, and it was in their offices that prayer services were held until the first synagogue was built in 1919.

That first synagogue was built by a man named Emil Bachrach. Born in Russia in 1871, he moved to the US and then heard about the opportunities in the Far East. He moved to Manila and opened a furniture store, then a general store, and finally teamed up with Ford and opened an automobile dealership.

Bachrach had unfortunately married an American Catholic woman, however, and the house of worship he built, known as Temple Emil, was officially Conservative. He died a fabulously wealthy man in 1937.

In November 1944, the Japanese took over the temple building and used it as an ammunition depot. During the fierce battle for Manila in which some 100,000 Philippine civilians died, the Japanese set fire to the building and the explosives inside detonated, destroying the structure. (On November 9, 1945, US GIs of all faiths gathered in the shell of the building to offer thanks to G-d for the defeat of the Axis powers.) The synagogue building was restored in 1947, serving a Jewish population immediately bolstered by refugees and US servicemen. But the community, which at its peak numbered about 2,500, predictably began to decline as these people moved on.



**Manila's Temple Emil. During the war, the building was used as an ammunition depot**



The building used for services until 1982 (top), when the new Beth Yaacov synagogue was built on condition it would be run according to halachah



# Join the Jews

Like so many other far-flung locations we've visited over the years, the Philippines, too, is home to an unusual clan of pseudo-Jews. The story starts with a Christian man named Gaspar Villaflores, who was captured and tortured by the Japanese in WWII. He managed to escape and survive the war, and when he embarked on the search for a new, meaningful life path, he discovered Judaism. He then declared himself Jewish, became self-educated to the best of his ability, and taught his family everything he knew about Judaism. Today the clan has its own house of worship, and its members keep laws of kashrus to the best of their ability, perform their version of shechitah, and keep the holidays to the extent of their knowledge.

"The first time we heard about them was one Friday night, when the security guard summoned my husband to allow this self-proclaimed 'Jew' inside the shul," says Rebbetzin Miriam. "My husband didn't



One of about 150 Jewish graves, scattered among those of over 17,000 US military personnel killed during World War II

know them, but after a quick investigation he invited them to the house for the Shabbat meal. The man had another five family members with him, and when the talk at the table turned to the *parshah* and about reciting Shema, this fellow mentioned that his young daughter knew the Shema. We thought, maybe she knows the first words, or can recite parts in English, but then the girl got up and started to recite the full Shema in Hebrew. We were all in shock."

After that, Rabbi Azaria

traveled to the Philippine island of Negros, where the clan lives. He was amazed to see the elders teaching the Torah portion and Hebrew songs in a place so far from any Jewish community.

They aren't looking for converts to their community, and one joins only by marrying in to the clan. There are today just over 100 members, and although there is no halachic basis for the Judaism, one girl from the group did actually convert to Judaism and today lives in the US.

## Too Small for Politics

The population shifted in the latter part of the 20th century. At the time, the community was leaning toward Ashkenazi and Conservative but some Sephardic *gvirim* said they would step to the plate financially on the condition the nusach was shifted to Sfard and it was run Orthodox; and so in 1982 they built the new Beth Yaacov synagogue in another part of town, run according to halachah until today.

No one really knows how many Jews live in the Philippines today, although Lee Blumenthal, administrator of the Jewish Association of the Philippines, estimates that there are about 1,500 Jews scattered over the archipelago. He confesses that they often learn about isolated Jews only after they pass away and their local spouse is looking to bury them in a Jewish cemetery.

There are about 360 people buried in the local Jewish cemetery, but there are also about 150 Jewish graves scattered among 17,206 US military personnel buried in the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial, which has the largest number of graves of any cemetery for US personnel killed during World War II.

Rabbi Azaria emphasizes that in a small kehillah like his, everyone is welcome — politics is a luxury they can't afford. "We try to find something to attract people from all walks of life," he says. "And it seems to be working."

## Poker Faces

In 1935, the US granted the Philippines independence, changing its status from a colony to a commonwealth. That meant they could now set their own immigration policy. Concern about the fate of European Jews led to the formation of a Jewish refugee committee as well as a mass rally by non-Jews. But the real action took place over a couple of poker games.

Jewish businessman Herbert Frieder owned the Helena cigar company and had a top-tiered group of friends he smoked and played poker with. They included US high commissioner Paul McNutt, Philippine president Manuel Quezon, and Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was chief assistant to General Douglas MacArthur and was working with Quezon. Quezon publicly announced that any Jew who made it to the Philippines would be permitted to stay. Looking for ways to help, he offered to transform the entire island of Mindanao into a haven for millions

of European Jewish refugees. But proclamations were not enough; the poker-playing friends devised a plan to save 10,000 Jews.

By late 1941, about 1,300 Jews had already made their way to the Philippines. But when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and then attacked the US forces in the Philippines, the US forces retreated, Quezon was evacuated to Washington, D.C., and the Japanese began a three-year occupation of Manila. In a strange twist, Jews from "enemy" countries were imprisoned together with more than 35,000 other allied civilians, while those from Japanese-allied countries, such as Germany and Austria, were allowed to continue living as usual. Thus, while American Jews were detained, the refugee Jews from Europe maintained a relatively normal life; they even had a functioning shul and a rabbi.

Following the war, the Filipinos did not abandon their Jewish guests, and in the 1947 UN vote regarding the creation of the State of Israel, it was the only Asian nation to vote "yes."