

Judaism in Pre-war Japan

Introduction

The Project on “Jews and Judaism in Japan” Conducted with the CISMOR Research Group

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On January 26, 2014 the first workshop on the theme “Jews and Judaism in Japan” took place at Doshisha University. This workshop marks the beginning of the realization of a project I initiated about five years ago and which has gradually been joined by other scholars. The original motivation of the project was to follow up the research to which Prof. Masanori Miyazawa has dedicated his academic life, and still continues to do as an Emeritus professor. Prof. Miyazawa’s studies focus on Japan and the Jews, including the cataloguing of all relevant material published in Japan. His two comprehensive volumes of bibliography are the corner-stones for any study of this subject.¹

The purpose of the research project “Jews and Judaism in Japan” is to study the reality of the Jews within the history of Modern Japan and attitudes of the Japanese people towards the Jews as reflected by governmental activities, publications in the newspapers, and by scholars in the Japanese academia. Some of the scholars who constitute the core members of this project, and who read papers during the workshop, are Masanori Miyazawa (Doshisha Women’s College), Chizuko Takao (Rikkyo University), Hiroshi Ichikawa (Tokyo University), Izumi Sato (Toyo Gakuen University), Etsuko Katsumata (Doshisha University), Doron B. Cohen (Doshisha University) and the above signed. Some other scholars joined us for this workshop, as well as for the following workshop that was held on September 21, 2014 and titled: *The Migrations of Jews in the 19th to the 21st Century around the World with Relation to Japan and the Far East.*²

Historically speaking, the Jews are a phenomenon the Japanese have encountered only during modern times, and initially not through direct contact with the Jews themselves but rather indirectly through written sources and rumors. As has been described in detail by Prof. Ben-Ami Shillony in his book *The Jews and the Japanese* as

well as by Goodman and Miyazawa in their volume *Jews in the Japanese Mind*,³ it was not until the Meiji Era that the Japanese encountered Jews in person. While some Jews settled in Japan after the Meiji restoration, they constituted a small part of the larger foreign community residing in Japan; the Japanese could not distinguish between Jews and other nationals, especially since the Jews were identified by their respective nationalities and not as Jews per-se. Jewish people arrived as individuals and settled in Japan in order to assist with its modernization process or for business reasons, rather than as the migration of a community. Still, during this period small communities were created in Yokohama and Nagasaki, as well as in Kobe, where eventually a synagogue was erected, and even some Jewish burial sites were consecrated. The historical developments at the beginning of the 20th century with the Balfour Declaration made the Japanese more aware of the Jewish cause, but for political reasons this issue still remained a distant one. The studies of Dr. Kunio Ishida shed light on that period clarifying the attitude of the Japanese government towards the region of Palestine.⁴

Research on Jews and Judaism is not a popular field in the Japanese academy, and except for Doshisha University, which has established a program for undergraduate and graduate levels in Jewish Studies, no other university has such a program.⁵ In a paper read recently at the Hebrew University, Prof. Yu Takeuchi of Kumamoto University, a core member of our CISMOR project, summarized the development of research on Judaism in Japan. He specified the number of academic associations for Jewish Studies, research projects, journals publishing papers on Jewish studies and more. Although there are some important developments, the subject is still somewhat “esoteric.”⁶

Studies published on Jews in Japan tend to focus mainly on the period of the Second World War, in which the Japanese came into actual contact with a large number of Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazi regime and the war in Europe. The studies offered in this issue of *JISMOR* treat the political reasons that led the Japanese to accept Jewish refugees and at the same time question whether the Japanese actually understood what kind of people the Jews were. The issue of Anti-Semitism, which was brought to Japan through foreign influence, created a negative attitude in the perception of the image of the Jew.⁷

The issue of Japanese Anti-Semitism, without the actual existence of Jews, has been the focus of many publications especially during the late 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's, with the increase of publications of the type of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in Japanese. We hope to devote a separate workshop to this topic in the future, to try to look into it with an approximate 20-year retrospective. It seems quite clear that the Japanese perception of these Anti-Semitic publications is not similar to European

Anti-Semitism or other “traditional” Anti-Semitism, but the question why such publications gained popularity in Japan still remains.⁸ The above-mentioned two English publications written about Jews and Japan have the following titles: *Jews in the Japanese Mind* and *Japanese Attitudes Toward Jews*. It is interesting to note that the *way-of-thinking* is stressed in the words: “attitude” and “mind,” rather than *activities or relations*.

The research project “Jews and Judaism in Japan” is to follow two directions: the first, based on historical-cultural and anthropological perspectives, will try to track Jewish life in Japan and its relations with other Jewish communities in East Asia. Our research will deal with the first communities of Jews in Japan, and their relations with the mainland, especially in places such as Harbin and Shanghai.

The second direction will attempt to study the academic interest in Jews and Judaism as religious-cultural phenomena in modern Japan, and mostly in recent decades. Several questions are raised regarding subjects of research that Japanese scholars have pursued throughout the years, including the amount and kind of studies published and their tendencies. We will also refer to the general society, such as media and literary publications about Jews, education in schools regarding Jews and Judaism and more.

An unavoidable issue in the study of Jews in Japan is the treatment of the State of Israel, which is often referred to as the “Jewish state.” Indeed, Israel today has half of the world’s Jewish population, although some 20% of its citizens are non-Jews, including a large Muslim and Christian (Arab) population. The attitude of the Japanese political leadership towards Israel has mostly been a reserved one, evolving from the political interests of the Japanese government. The research will try to follow up cultural and academic relations between the two countries, but will not attempt to evaluate the political activities or stances taken by the two countries.

Finally, the two Israeli members of the research group, living in Japan, may suggest a direction for cultural contacts and relations between Japan and Israel. We will try to refer to the impact Israeli culture has on the Japanese; for example: how many Japanese visit Israel, how many Japanese students study in Israel and return to Japan or not; and how many scholars research Israel as a topic.

The papers delivered at the January 26th workshop belonged to both aspects of the study: that of the historical perspective and that of the ethnographic as well as academic study and publications on Judaism in Japan. At the end the impressions of an Israeli-Jew in Japan were introduced. Following are the titles of the papers delivered at the workshop, two of which appear in this issue of *JISMOR*⁹:

- Masanori Miyazawa: “Pro-Nazi Newspapers in Showa Wartime Japan: The increase in Anti-Semitism and Those who Opposed This Trend”
- Chizuko Takao: “The Harbin Jewish Community under Japanese Rule 1939-1941”
- Izumi Sato: “History of the Jewish Communities in Japan: Nagasaki, Kobe, Yokohama, Karuizawa and Tokyo”
- Hiroshi Ichikawa: “The translation of the Talmud into Japanese and its meaning”
- Etsuko Katsumata: “Recent Japanese Publications Relating to Judaism”
- Doron B. Cohen: “Being Israeli in Japan”

Prof. Miyazawa’s paper surveys the attitude towards Jews as demonstrated in the major newspapers such as the *Asahi Shinbun* and *Mainichi Shinbun*, in the years between the rise of Nazism and the end of the Second World War. He shows how initially the Nazis’ racist treatment of the Jews was not accepted or actually understood by Japanese, but later, being influenced by Nazi propaganda and the allied relations with Germany, voicing vicious and highly negative attitudes towards the Jews by directly quoting Hitler’s speeches, became the norm. Miyazawa states that towards the end of the war “Japanese newspapers were no longer transmitters of facts, but they had become a medium for dispensing far-fetched arguments founded on distorted facts [...] their arguments (editorials) ceased to be truthful and became extremely dogmatic and dishonest.”

The influx of Jewish refugees brought some Japanese in contact with Jews for the first time. Although they seemed strange to the Japanese, they treated them kindly. However, the newspapers did not seem to report in this tone. Miyazawa’s newspapers’ quotes vividly show the different — mostly negative but also positive — perspectives of what the Japanese termed the “Jewish question.”

Prof. Takao’s paper deals with the Jews under Japanese occupation before and during WWII in Harbin as part of the region of Manchukuo. Her paper presents vividly the state in which Jews were torn apart between the Russian communists and those opposing them, and how the Japanese authorities were unable to protect them, but rather condemned them when one of their leaders said during a funeral of a murdered Jew that the Jews only expected “the state authorities (to) have an obligation to establish peace.” Based on the study of documents housed in the Zionist Archive in Jerusalem and an interview with the main actor in the Jewish community of Harbin at that time, Abraham Kaufman, Prof. Takao presents a clearer picture of the role played by the Japanese in that city during the devastating years at the beginning of the war.

Additional Reading:

- 1) *The Jewish Community of Japan 50th Anniversary Yearbook* (Nama Productions, Jewish Community of Japan, 2004).
- 2) Ben Ami Shillony, *Japanese Views on Jews and Judaism* (ed. Shazar Library, The Herman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, workshop of the Study Circle on World Jewry in the Home of the President of Israel, 1993) [in Hebrew]
- 3) Pamela Rotner Sakamoto, *Japanese Diplomats and Jewish Refugees: A World War II Dilemma* (London: Praeger, 1998).
- 4) Marvin Tokayer and Ellen Rodman, *Pepper, Silk & Ivory: Amazing Stories about Jews and the Far East* (Jerusalem-New York: Gefen publishing house, 2014).
- 5) Marvin Tokayer and Mary Swartz, *The Fugu Plan: The Untold Story of the Japanese and the Jews During World War II* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 1979 edition of 2004).

Notes

- ¹ Masanori Miyazawa, *Nihon ni Okeru Yudaya • Isuraeru Rongi Bunken Mokuroku 1877-1988*, Tokyo: Shinsensya, 1990; Masanori Miyazawa, *Nihon ni Okeru Yudaya • Isuraeru Rongi Bunken Mokuroku 1988-2004*, Kyoto: Showado, 2005.
- ² See <http://www.cismor.jp/en/2014/09/22/immigrant-acculturation-and-transnationalism-israelis-in-the-united-states-and-europe-compared/> (as of Dec. 10, 2014).
- ³ Japanese version—Ben-Amy Shillony, *Yudayajin to Nihonjin: Itanshisare, Hakugaisarenagara Seikoushita Ryominzoku* (Tokyo: Nihon Kouhou, 1993). See book review by Sheila K. Johnson, “Book Review of Ben-Ami Shillony, *The Jews and the Japanese: The Successful Outsiders* (Tuttle, Rutland&Tokyo, 1992),” in: *Monumenta Nipponica* 48:1 (1993), 136-139. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2385479?seq=2> (As of Dec. 12, 2014). David G. Goodman and Masanori Miyazawa, *Jews in the Japanese Mind: The History and Uses of a Cultural Stereotype* (New York: Free Press, 1995).
- ⁴ His important dissertation: Kunio Ishida, “The Origins of Japan’s Postwar Policy in the Middle East: The case of Establishing Diplomatic Relations with Israel, 1952-1956,” (PhD Dissertation; Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2009). See his recent co-authored article with Shiraishi in Japanese about mandate Palestine. Kunio Ishida and Masaaki Shiraishi, “Dainiji Sekaitaisen Zen’ya ni okeru Kyokuto no Yudayajin to Nihon Gaiko,” *Gaiko Shiryoukanho* 26, Tokyo: Gaimusyo Gaiko Siryoukan, 2012 (“Jews in the Far East and Japan’s Diplomacy in the eve of WWII”).
- ⁵ For a description of the program see in Japanese followed by English: <http://acohen.freya.weblife.me/mhw/pg307.html> (as of Jan. 1, 2014).

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- ⁶ See Yu Takeuchi, “The Rise of Interest in Jewish Studies in Japanese Academia,” a paper published in:http://sfile.f-static.com/image/users/215554/ftp/my_files/Special%20Issue/NewFiles/tekeuchi%20fulltext.pdf?id=15913170 (as of Dec. 15, 2014). See also Kotaro Hiraoka, “The Present Status of Jewish Studies in Japan: an Overview of the Prospectuses of Academic Associations,” *Isshinkyosekai 2* (CISMOR, 2009).
- ⁷ For a presentation of the issue see Rotem Kowner “On Ignorance, Respect and Suspicion: Current Japanese Attitudes toward Jews,” *The Vidal Sassoon Internatinal Center for the Study of Antisemitism The Hebrew University of Jerusalem: Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism*, (1997 acta no. 11) <http://sicsa.huji.ac.il/11kowner.htm> (as of Dec. 10, 2014).
- ⁸ The Pacific Rim Institute of the American Jewish Committee, published a research paper in 1992 on this issue which should be re-read and interpreted: Jennifer Golub, *Japanese Attitudes Toward Jews*, see http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/889.pdf (as of Dec. 10, 2014).
- ⁹ For the workshop see: <http://www.cismor.jp/en/2014/01/26/jews-and-judaism-in-japan/>. And also <http://www.cismor.jp/en/2014/09/22/immigrant-acculturation-and-transnationalism-israelis-in-the-united-states-and-europe-compared/> (as of Dec. 10, 2014).