
Reviewed by Andrea Pflaumer, Berkeley, California, USA

Sadia Shepard’s remarkable memoir *The Girl from Foreign* is as satisfying for the personal mysteries it solves as it is unsettling for the larger geo-political questions it raises. Born in Denver, the daughter of an American Christian father and a Pakistani Muslim mother, Shepard embraces her multicultural identity (‘it’s all one God,’) in a country that welcomes hyphenation. But as a young woman embarking on a writing career she learns that her maternal grandmother, who lived with and was an important part of the family during Shepard’s formative years, was not originally from Pakistan nor was she Muslim. She was, in fact, born into the Bene Israel community of Western India as Rachel Jacobs. In her grandmother’s final years she asks Shepard to ‘tell my story,’ launching the young woman on an arduous physical and emotional journey to discover her grandmother’s roots, a voyage that became one of self-discovery as well.

On a Fulbright scholarship Shepard spent two years in Mumbai, India researching the history of the Bene Israel and her own familial link to that community. Her tale systematically unfolds the series of events that ultimately resulted in her grandmother’s immigration to Pakistan and conversion during the Partition in order to join the Muslim man she had wed in secret and into whose multi-wived family enclave she came to dwell.

Shepard is an artful storyteller, weaving a sometimes magical narrative that connects several events separated in time to create a work that reads like fiction. We learn about a woman who not only lived a complex and intriguing life, but whose supernatural gifts would have established her as extraordinary in any context. But as fascinating as her story is, we are given scant revelations about her motivations and most intimate thoughts. (In all fairness, it is likely Shepard was unable to explore them in any depth before her grandmother died.) As such, we are left to extrapolate the passions and familial dynamics, the cultural and emotional landscape that framed her grandmother’s choices. Viewed from another perspective those choices might have been seen as scandalous or sacrilegious. To make them comprehensible they must be seen within the framework of the history and circumstances of Jewish life in mid-century India.

The survival of the Indian subcontinent as a democratic civilization has been due, to a large extent, to the spiritual underpinnings that enabled it to embrace even those forces that would invade and conquer. As such India has remained a blended society of pluralism and inclusion - a welcoming home to numerous cultures. The Jews were no exception and their history in the East is rich with mythology, legend and curious coincidence. There exists a compelling body of data indicating cross-fertilization between

*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal Spring 2009 Volume 6 Number 1*

ISSN 1209-9392

© 2009 Women in Judaism, Inc.
ancient tribes of the Indus Valley and that of the early Jewish tribes. One legend even holds that the Jews originated in India near what is now Pakistani Kashmir and migrated west to Palestine. In a provocative article from April 2007’s Moment magazine, writer Ilene Prusher describes the affinity held by the Pashtun people of Pakistan for the Jewish people and their traditions. Some of the Pashtuns hold the belief that they are descended from one of the Lost Tribes. As evidence they cite several customs and rituals that are common solely to Jews, as well as identical or nearly identical nomenclature: many of the names of local towns in the region are derivative from Hebrew, and many people in their communities have names that are traditionally Jewish. [It is important to note that Israel is besieged with several ‘Lost Tribes’ who have suddenly discovered their Jewish heritage in the hopes of immigrating to Israel and away from their impoverished homelands.]

What is not subject to legend is the fact that for thousands of years two Jewish communities have made India their home: the Cochin of Kerala in the south and that of Shepard’s grandmother, the Bene Israel near Mumbai. The Cochin are said to have arrived after the destruction of the temple around 70 CE. The Bene Israel claim to be descended from seven families who, escaping from oppression in Galilee 2100 years ago, were shipwrecked on the West Indian coast. Today, more than 50,000 Indian Jews have immigrated to Israel and only a handful of Cochin and around 2000 Bene Israel remain. Although Indian Jews maintained their customs and distinct identity, they assimilated into the broader community in other ways. Their women dressed in traditional Indian attire and they adopted local surnames. They distinguished themselves as businessmen and military officers. In what primarily remains a Hindu state, those professions correlated to the warrior (kshatriya) and business (vaishya) castes in the class system that until only recently defined much of Indian culture. It is conceivable that the very welcoming nature of the Indian culture succeeded in fading or at least making porous the more solid boundaries of Rachel Jacobs’ Jewish cultural identity.

At the time Jacobs came of age, the political rumblings in 1947 that accompanied the exit of the British from power in India gave rise to old discords. Once the British were no longer the face of oppression, the spirit of conflict had to find a new enemy and old tensions arose between Muslims and Hindus. As the newly formed UN divided up the Middle East and established the state of Israel in an attempt to right the horrific wrongs of the Holocaust, Muslims in India felt authorized to demand their own state as well. The result was a mass exodus of Muslims to newly formed Pakistan and the subsequent eviction of Pakistani Hindus to India. The violent transition that ensued created in Kashmir one of the most volatile and unstable borders that still exists in the world today. But traditionally, Hindus and Muslims throughout the Indian subcontinent have always treated Jews with respect and care (a fact that makes the recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai even more troubling). In fact, Shepard learns that the long-time caretaker of the Bene Israel synagogue outside of Mumbai is a Muslim.
It was on the backdrop of these dramatic events that Rachel Jacobs’ Muslim husband moved his family to Pakistan, and begged his new, youngest bride to follow. We can only speculate about how Jacobs came to her decision to do so. Because the Bene Israel identified with very ancient Jewish traditions, the concept of polygamy was perhaps not as unusual or forbidden as it is today, particularly under Israeli law. The Talmud, after all, allowed for a maximum of four wives, and until the 16th century many European Jews continued the practice. It also has been commonly understood in India that a new wife (often in an arranged marriage over which she had little choice) would leave her home, relocating to far distant villages to live with the husband’s family. It is not difficult to imagine that the decision to marry a wealthy man during financially unstable times – particularly in a union not arranged by family fiat - was initially exciting to the adventurous young Jacobs: in many ways, she was something of a feminist. But as her life unfolds we learn, in a wistful revelation, that under other circumstances and at another time her choices likely would have been different.

Throughout *The Girl from Foreign* Sadia Shepard brings us inside her own skin, a young woman viewed by Indian Jews, Hindus and Muslims alike as awkward and of indeterminate cultural origins. For the two years she lived among the Bene Israel in Mumbai she was seen largely as an outsider among outsiders in a foreign land. In one telling event she makes a brief trip to her mother’s home in Pakistan in order to attend a cousin’s wedding, only the latest of many such family reunions she had enjoyed as a child. But this time she discovers how a fundamentalist version of Islam has now been embraced by even her most loved relations, insinuating its confining tenets into the most joyous of occasions.

For someone of lesser clarity, the experience of researching and writing this book could have served to undermine her inner foundations. But in telling her grandmother’s story and embracing her own Indian-Jewish origins we witness her growth. The discoveries she makes and the ability to integrate them into her life made it possible for Shepard to confirm and affirm a unique identity: that of a hyphenated, but truly authentic, American writer.