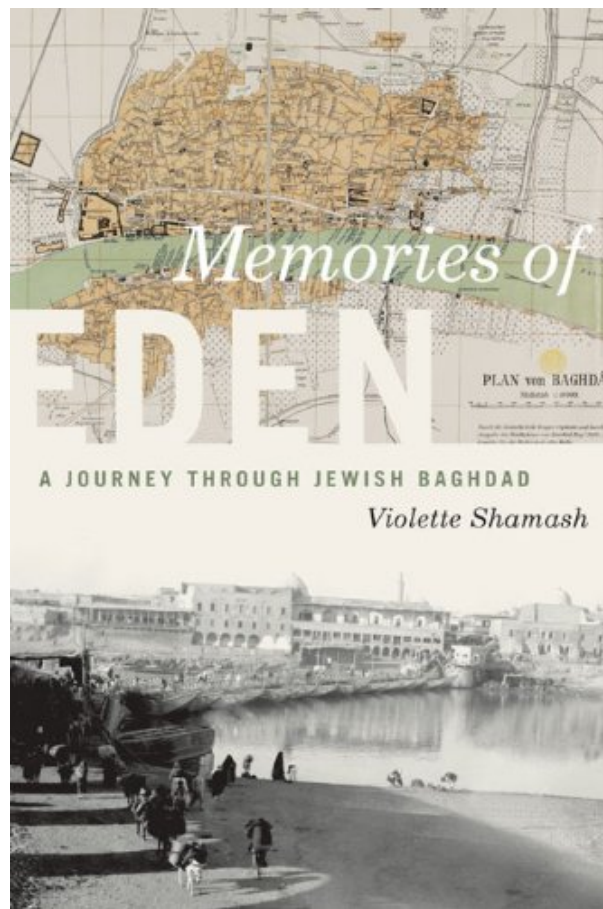
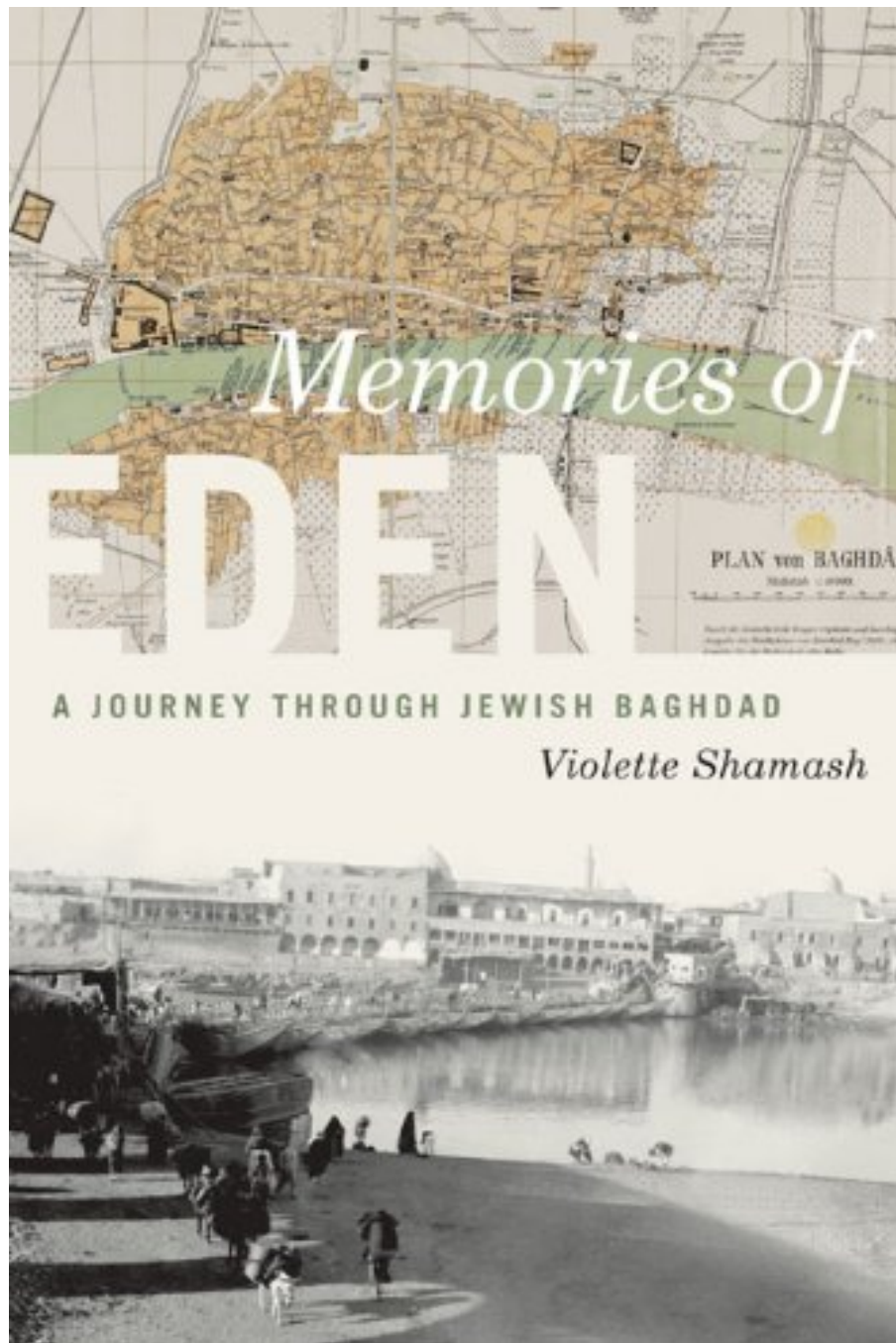


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THROUGH JEWISH BAGHDAD (JEWISH
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Review

“Memories of Eden provides as sumptuous an account of the world of the Baghdadi Jewish elite as we’re likely to get.”

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MEMORIES OF EDEN: A JOURNEY THROUGH JEWISH BAGHDAD (JEWISH LIVES) BY VIOLETTE SHAMASH, SHMUEL MOREH PDF

According to legend, the Garden of Eden was located in Iraq, and for millennia, Jews resided peacefully in metropolitan Baghdad. *Memories of Eden: A Journey Through Jewish Baghdad* reconstructs the last years of the oldest Jewish Diaspora community in the world through the recollections of Violette Shamash, a Jewish woman who was born in Baghdad in 1912, sent to her daughter Mira Rocca and son-in-law, the British journalist Tony Rocca. The result is a deeply textured memoir—an intimate portrait of an individual life, yet revealing of the complex dynamics of the Middle East in the twentieth century.

Toward the end of her long life, Violette Shamash began writing letters, notes, and essays and sending them to the Roccas. The resulting

book begins near the end of Ottoman rule and runs through the British Mandate, the emergence of an independent Iraq, and the start of

dictatorial government. Shamash clearly loved the world in which she grew up but is altogether honest in her depiction of the transformation of attitudes toward Baghdad's Jewish population. Shamash's world is finally shattered by the Farhud, the name given to the massacre of hundreds of Iraqi Jews over three days in 1941. An event that has received very slight historical coverage, the Farhud is further described and placed in context in a concluding essay by Tony Rocca.

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Most helpful customer reviews

21 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

Fantastic Story

By IraqiInAmerica

Both my parents were born in Baghdad, and my grandmother would have been about the same age and moved in the same social circles as Violette Shamash, the author, did. This book, therefore, takes me back to my childhood stories, of the homes that were left in haste, the great bounty of the land and rivers, the friendships with people from all religions and the lifestyle that is forever missed.

This book is written in two hands, the first two thirds were written by Violette Shamash and tells her very personal story of Jewish life in Baghdad. It is told in great sensitivity and humanity, is mostly touching and frequently hilarious, especially if you can imagine the stories told in the dialect of Baghdad Jews. Violette's stories provide different aspects of life in Baghdad in the 20's and 30's through her own experiences, from school days, through various festivals, religious opportunities, the seasonality of life, commerce and street life all the way to weddings, family life and the relationships with the muslim neighbors.

The second part is an historical account of the role the English played in the establishment of modern day Iraq, especially as it concerns the overthrow of the regent in 1941 and the ensuing farhud, the slaughter of the Jewish community in Baghdad by some of their muslim neighbors. It focuses on the actions and inactions of the British ambassador, one Kinahan Cornwallis, that apparently had so much invested in the Iraqi project that it took priority over his loyalty to his country and prime minister.

If this book touches your roots I am sure you will enjoy it greatly and will wish, like me, that you knew more and listened to more stories. If you don't, this book will open a window for you into a world that, very likely, you never knew existed yet was so close.

14 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

Baghdad: The dream before the nightmare.

By J. Cousins

This is a beautiful story, and a desperately sad one too. Violette Shamash started her life in pretty idyllic circumstances, as a member of the Jewish community in Baghdad. You'll have to forgive me here, but I thought Iraq would have been pretty much top of the list for places you wouldn't expect to find a Jewish person. Turns out, though, that between the wars Violette and her family were among 200,000 Jewish people living in Baghdad.

It was a simple but delightful time.

And, guess what? The Jewish community and their Muslim neighbours got along together just fine. Mutual respect... Violette tells charming stories of an uncomplicated life where everything was great.

Until it wasn't.

Things changed, in a horrible way. Enough to make it vital that she, her husband and their children fled: first to India, then to Palestine, and finally to London.

I defy you to read this book without being profoundly moved. Iraq is a fragile and complex place today. How desperately sad, therefore, to learn from this book of its former harmony. How come it all went so wrong?

Today you can count the number of Iraqi Jewish people on the fingers of two hands. Please read this book, whose story must be more widely known.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

fascinating book about a world that was and no longer exists, as well as an important historical document

By Dafna

GET THIS BOOK!! The book 'Memories from Eden' is a fascinating book about a world that was and no longer exists, as well as an important historical document. I read the book in one day; once I started I couldn't put it down. The book is well written; the stories and the pictures do make you feel that life in Bagdad in the turn of the 20 century was as the title suggests a sort of a paradise. The historical synopsis and facts were smartly incorporated providing necessary historical context to the stories without being overbearing. For those who are like me, descendants of this world, the book provides an important connection to our past and heritage.

I enjoyed the book so much that in the weeks following reading the book I spoke about it with everyone I met and was somewhat obsessive in telling these stories to whoever was willing to listen. Maybe the best testament to how interesting the book is, is the fascination it created amongst my young nieces, ages 8 & 10. A few days after I finished reading the book, I visited my nieces and I started telling the younger one the stories from the book and she asked for more and more stories and was completely captivated by them. I think I told her all the stories in one afternoon. Later that day, when we met my older niece, the younger niece was so excited by the stories and enthusiastically started telling her sister the stories herself!

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while everyone is talking about the Palestinian Refugees, this book is an important document of the forgotten refugees, the "Jewish Refugees" - over 1 million Jews who lived for thousands of years in Arab countries and had to escape in the 40's and 50's, following the bloody Arab persecution of Jews, leaving behind their lands, homes, property and the life they knew and

loved. I hope that this book and others like it will create awareness to this grave injustice and will lead to a discussion for compensation for the 1 million Jewish refugees whenever the issue of compensation to the Palestinian refugees will arise, correlating the two, as should be.

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