

The Last Jews Of Sidon



Mrs. Yaffa Levy in Sidon's Synagogue

Mrs. Jaffa Levy, who with her family were the last Jews to leave the Southern Lebanon city of Sidon, pauses in Sidon's synagogue and reflects. When the family left, with the withdrawing Israeli Defense Forces, they ended five generations of living in the picturesque city on the shores of the Mediterranean. -- UJA Press Service Photo by Richard Lobell.

By Richard Lobell
UJA Press Service

ROSH HANIKRA, Northern Israel -- Members of the Levy family were the last Jews of Sidon. They were the final vestige of a community that once numbered 5000 Jews who lived in peace with their neighbors near the Mediterranean, in Southern Lebanon.

The Levy family -- Jamine (Yaffa), who is 54, her four children ages 17 to 25, her sister and their mother -- left with the withdrawing Israeli Defense Forces from the ancient city that could no longer be called their home.

I interviewed them in Sidon before the Israeli withdrawal began; they passed by here en route to Jerusalem.

"My husband Yosef, who was a tailor, died in 1977 and we considered moving then," said Mrs. Levy, a fifth generation Sidonese Jew. "But his brother was still here then and he looked after us. When my daughter Malka married seven years ago, and she and her husband moved to Brazil, I thought the family might follow her. However, we felt my mother was too old and ill to face such a move and the other four children were still in school. In any case we weren't badly off and Sidon had always been our home."

The Levy home was a spacious old apartment on the top floor of a two-story building overlooking the Mediterranean, the fishing port of Sidon, and the remains of a Crusader castle that juts out into the sea. Old postcards show this area to be picturesque and colorful. Today, after years of civil war and other fighting, the area is in ruins.

The Levys' home is at the edge of the Casbah, the city's marketplace. The area was once mostly Jewish and the narrow, twisting lanes which wind their way from her door to the synagogue in the middle of the Casbah, once passed mainly Jewish homes and shops.

In 1948, after the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli war, the Levys and other Jews of Sidon fled to the mountains or the anonymity of Beirut. Although Lebanon remained neutral in the war, the Jews, being Jews, feared reprisals. The Levy family returned from the mountains after a year.

The four subsequent Arab-Israeli wars were also tense times for the Jews of Lebanon, although they enjoyed freedom unheard of in any other Arab country. But over the years, more and more Lebanese Jews felt that Sidon held no future for them. Since 1975 the Levys were the last Jews of Sidon.

Mrs. Levy still holds the keys to the synagogue, in the alleys of the old marketplace. She would frequently stop to say "hello" to her neighbors. Most of them were Palestinians but Mrs. Levy was on excellent terms with them.

Before leaving Sidon for good, she took one last walk through the neighborhood that had been home to her and her family for so many generations. She pointed to doors: "The Cohens lived here. Over there, the Simantovs." She stopped by the closed doors of what had been her husband's tailor shop; she seemed wistful.

Another few bends in the confusing maze of dark alleys, then Mrs. Levy reached a locked door. The synagogue was well over a hundred years old. The pale blue walls were crumbling and the bimah, the platform where the cantor used to chant Hebrew melodies, looked as though it would topple over at any moment. Some prayer shawls and books sat in an old cupboard, left there by Israeli soldiers.

Perhaps fittingly, the last place that Mrs. Levy went to bid farewell was the Jewish cemetery, on a hill overlooking the sea. A Palestinian refugee camp now surrounds the old cemetery, and the tombstones are in disrepair. Children in ragged clothing played in the sand among the graves. Yaffa Levy stopped by her husband's grave and stood silently for a while. "This has been our home for so long," said Mrs. Levy, staring southwards over the graves to the sea. "I wish we could stay, but now it is no longer possible."



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