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The Sassoons: From Outsiders to Insiders of Empire 1830s – 1910s

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Abstract

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In 1829, after a series of persecutions by the Pasha in Baghdad, David Sassoon fled to the port town of Bushehr, Persia barely escaping with his life. He would become the patriarch of the Sassoon Dynasty whose business exploits would span the globe and whose prestige in the West would rise in less than a century. Settling in Bombay in 1830, a ramshackle and underdeveloped port, David Sassoon overtook the established Parsi and Hindu traders in the region to corner both the opium and cotton markets to such an extent that the family would be known as the “Rothschilds of the East,” by British imperial society. Their trade routes, held together by their extensive Jewish Baghdadi diasporic network, stretched from London to Shanghai.

This thesis analyzes the 1830s to 1910s period of the Sassoons’ navigation of and integration into British imperial society as Baghdadi Jews as well as the limitations of that integration in the interwar period. This thesis does not follow a biographical or chronological approach but rather a thematic one centered on the exploration of the Sassoon family’s shifting constructions of identity and their negotiation of minority status from British colonial India to the metropole. The nineteenth century, a period of intense change, undergirds the Sassoons’ attempts at integrating into the British imperial system as they negotiate changes to global capitalism as well as debate on the appropriate status and treatment of Jews in European society. The shifting definitions of belonging in this period highlight the distinct challenges faced by the Sassoons as they moved between the frameworks of insiders and outsiders to the British empire.

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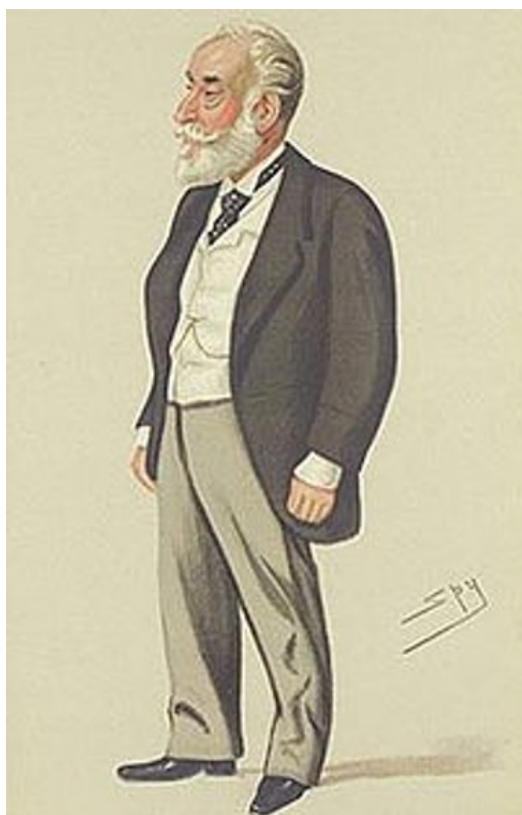
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Introduction



Sir Albert Abdallah David Sassoon, "The Indian Rothschild," 16 August 1879, *Vanity Fair* cartoon.

On August 16th, 1879 *Vanity Fair* published a cartoon titled "The Indian Rothschild" drawn by the famous caricaturist, Sir Leslie Ward, also known as Spy. This cartoon marked one Jewish family's remarkable journey from persecuted diasporic merchants to peers of England. The subject Sir Albert Abdallah David Sassoon's story began in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1818 and ended in Brighton, England, in 1896. The oldest son of David Sassoon, Sir Albert, headed David Sassoon & Co. upon his father's death in 1864, just as the company hit its stride in the commodity markets of the British Empire. Jews had not always been welcomed in the empire. The Sassoons faced an upward battle of

marked difference throughout the nineteenth century and did not assimilate but rather integrated and selectively acculturated while emphasizing their difference at times to cultivate their roles as imperial intermediaries. The title of the *Vanity Fair* cartoon reveals the family's amalgamation of identities as Indian, Jewish, capitalist, and British imperial. My thesis analyzes the 1830s to pre-World War I period of the Sassoons' navigation of and integration into British imperial society as Baghdadi Jews as well as the limitations of that integration in the interwar period. This thesis does not follow a biographical or chronological approach but rather a thematic one centered on

the exploration of the Sassoon family's shifting constructions of identity and their negotiation of minority status from British colonial India to the metropole.

In chapter one, I explore how the frameworks of Britain's informal empire enabled the Sassoons and their diasporic networks to leverage imperial management and policy in South and East Asia to build a global business based on the commodities of cotton and opium. In chapter two, I utilize the Sassoons and the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora as a case study for Jewish engagement with capitalism in the modern period. I trace how the Sassoons' culture shaped their economic activities and how, in turn, the Baghdadi Jewish community, across the diaspora, was shaped by the Sassoons' economic activities. These relationships were strengthened along networks of trust, kinship, and shared language. Each, in turn, did important work in the community building that supported the Sassoons' economic activity. In chapter three, I analyze the Sassoons' strategies of integration and how they navigated the racial, ethnic, religious, and class hierarchies of empire vis à vis the British imperial elite and European Jews. Specifically, I focus on their strategies of presentation depending on their insider or outsider status within different imperial hierarchies. My thesis ends with twentieth-century changes when the Sassoon family in London, as native-born citizens, still contended with perceptions of their Jewishness and foreignness by others and themselves.

For my research, I relied on primary epistolary sources from the David Sassoon Archive housed in the National Library of Israel. The family archive, released in 1970, gave me intimate details about the family's kinship ties, community building, language, and networks of trust. The archive has rarely been used by scholars and was unorganized. Many sources, especially business sources, were in Judeo-Arabic. I only utilized the English sources in my scholarship. Using newspaper sources like the *Jewish Chronicle*, *North China Herald*, and records from the

British Library's India Office Records, I uncovered how the Sassoons were viewed in Jewish communities as well as Imperial British communities. In my research, I only found two monographs about the Sassoon family. First was *The Sassoon Dynasty*, written by the preeminent Jewish scholar, Cecil Roth, and published in 1941. At the time, Roth did not have access to the family archival materials. The second monograph, *The Sassoons*, by Stanley Jackson was published in 1968. Previously, Jackson worked on biographies focused on opera. As a friend of the Sassoons, Jackson received access to the family archive. However, his monograph is written for the layman rather than the scholar. Both monographs follow triumphalist narratives of Jewish engagement with capitalism that have been challenged by scholars recently as well as lack rigorous evidence and citation. My work is different as I utilized the family archive and published material during the nineteenth and early twentieth century to explore the multifaceted nature of their inner lives as well as their outward representation.

The past two decades have seen a wealth of new scholarship in the field of Jewish engagement with capitalism. As scholar Jerry Z. Muller said at the 29th Annual Lecture of the German Historical Institute, "Capitalism and the Jews is a subject that makes some people nervous. However, you cannot properly understand the modern history of the Jews without thinking about the links between Jews and capitalism."¹ The topic has been long riddled with anti-Semitism, and scholars as of late feel able to tackle the topic free of concerns of stoking anti-Semitism and free of triumphalist narratives of the past.² Historian Derek Penslar writes that economic antisemitism follows a "double helix of intersecting paradigms, the first associating

¹ Jerry Z. Muller, "Capitalism and the Jews Revisited" (Lecture, The German Historical Institute, D.C., Washington, November 12, 2015).

²Arnold Band, "Jewish Studies in American Liberal-Arts Colleges and Universities," in *Studies in Modern Jewish Literature* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 390-408.

the Jew with paupers and savages and the second conceiving of Jews as conspirators, leaders of a financial cabal seeking global domination.”³ To undo this age-old myth, historians have worked to contextualize Jewish engagement with capitalism and provide a historical analysis of Jewish exceptionalism without falling into essentialist tropes that outsize their role in the economy but do not understate their importance.⁴ Editors and Historians, Rebecca Kobrin and Adam Teller, assembled *Purchasing Power* to comment upon this dynamic. They explore the power of economic institutions in current global capitalism and their impact on Jewish economic activity. Their work represents the “economic turn” in the study of Jewish history in the last decade. It has set the tone for future study of Jewish engagement with capitalism by choosing to follow a contextualist methodology. For my work with the Sassoons, I converse with these methodologies by exploring how unique cultural and contextual factors, like their sub-ethnicity as Baghdadi Jews or British imperial policy, led them from being outsiders to insiders of the British Empire during the nineteenth century. In addition, previous scholarship about the Sassoon family has engaged only with triumphalist narratives that outsize the family’s role in the British opium trade sometimes even with antisemitic tropes. In my work, I contextualize the Sassoons’ engagement with imperial commodity trades in the nineteenth century in juxtaposition with other ethnic trading diasporas as well as British competitors.

Scholars of Jewish engagement with capitalism have explored how commodity trades can be distinctly tied to Jewish cultural experience as well as shape Jewish acculturation, chain migration, and networks of trust. Recently, Abrevaya Stein’s *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews,*

³ Derek Penslar, *Shylock’s Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 13.

⁴ David A., Hollinger, “Rich, Powerful, and Smart: Jewish Overrepresentation Should Be Explained Instead of Avoided or Mystified,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 94, no. 4 (2004): 595-602.

and a Lost World of Global Commerce followed a global commodity, ostrich feathers, to understand the breadth of Jewish trading diasporas in Africa, Europe, and North America. Historian Marni Davis's *Jews and Booze* showed how Jews operated within the prohibition era to understand how the selling and buying of alcohol affected Jewish acculturation in the United States. Like Davis, I look at how the Sassoon's economic activities affected their acculturation into the British Empire and later England. Similarly, I utilized the Sassoons' engagement with cotton and opium to understand how their economic activities were informed by both their Baghdadi Jewish heritage and the policies of the British empire. The Sassoons' engagement with commodity trades was also impacted by their geographical location in India, which was the epicenter for cotton and opium during the nineteenth century. Contextualizing their involvement in these trades accounts for their outsized role in the latter half of the century.

The history of the Sassoon family is particularly unique as it extends through the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. Focus on other sub-ethnic Jewish groups has been done by scholars like Joan G. Roland in her seminal work *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era*. Globalizing the story of Jews and capitalism, I also complement the small literature on Jews in India and Roland's study. Roland explores the ways that sub-ethnicity or location changes or challenges preconceived notions of Jewish life in the modern period. For example, Roland argues that Jewish identity shifted because of social structures in India, British imperialism, and the increasing influence of Zionism. I follow similar changes to the Sassoons' identity in both British India and England as they engaged with the imperial elite, other Jewish groups, and shifting government policies that impacted their status within these circles of influence. Few scholars have studied Jewish life in India in the modern period and research on

the Sassoons, during their time in Bombay, can be used as a case study to understand this specific Jewish diasporic group further.

Alongside these methodologies of cultural and contextual history, preceded the study of the court Jew and the port Jew. The model is tied to a general resurgence of scholarly interest in capitalism with the cultural turn in economic history. Work by scholars like Selma Stern and David Sorkin uncovered the singularity of port cities and European courts in fostering many of the patterns of economic behavior among Jews in commerce during the early modern period.⁵ This is an analytical framework that historians posed to explain Jewish readmission into early modern Europe after centuries of expulsions and economic exclusions. These types of tolerated Jews shed light on economic utility as a model for the basis on which Jews were tolerated and then gained access to citizenship in the modern period based on their economic utility as diaspora traders and financiers. Historians used these categories to account for how sub-ethnicity, chain migration, and networks of trust and credit shaped Jewish economic behavior.⁶ The Sassoons can be used to globalize these models and move them into the modern period. Their utility to the British empire as a diasporic ethnic trading group facilitated their access to British citizenship and peerage. I study how they function as port Jews through their economic activities in the port cities of Bombay, Shanghai, and London to integrate into British imperial society. Literature on Jews and capitalism has focused on Sephardim in the early modern period and on Ashkenazim in the modern period (Trivellato, Stein, Kobrin, Mendelsohn, Green). I globalize this focus and add

⁵ See David Sorkin, "The Port Jew: Notes toward a Social Type," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50, no. 1 (1999); Selma Stern, *The Court Jew: A Contribution to the History of the Period of Absolutism in Europe* (New Brunswick, U.S.A.: Transaction Books, 1985).

⁶ Rebecca Kobrin and Adam Teller, *Purchasing Power: The Economics of Modern Jewish History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 9-14.

Middle Eastern Jews to the mix, looking at trade in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, beyond the Mediterranean and Atlantic.

Overall, this is one exploration of Jewish engagement with British imperialism in the modern period with connections to trade in the Middle East as well as South and East Asia. I analyze how these historical contexts and geographical frameworks account for how the Sassoon family navigated culture and economy as well as identity and difference as outsider and insiders of empire. Research on Jews as an ethnic trading diaspora is central to understanding capitalism in the modern period. Furthermore, my thesis globalizes the port Jew model, by taking a wider lens to study this engagement in the modern period by focusing on citizenship, ethnicity, sub-ethnicity, and empire. In conversation with recent scholarship in the field, I use the Sassoons as a case study to understand how they gained access to “insider” status in the British empire during the modern period through their negotiations of identity as well as based on their economic utility as diaspora traders and financiers.

I intend for this not to be the history of one family but rather a history of minority negotiation over time, geography, and rapid cultural change. Specifically, I lay out how the Sassoon family negotiated their marginalization within the British imperial system and how that, in turn, affected the construction of their identity over several generations. The nineteenth century, a period of intense change, undergirds the Sassoons’ attempts at integrating into the British imperial system as they negotiate changes to global capitalism as well as debate on the appropriate status and treatment of Jews in European society. At the same time, they also navigated the beginnings of the politicization of racial and ethnonationalist conceptions of European belonging, which often undid their attempts to integrate in the twentieth century. The

shifting definitions of belonging in this period highlight the distinct challenges faced by the Sassoons as they moved between the frameworks of insiders and outsiders to the British empire.

I. Meeting Englishmen at the Docks of Bombay: The Informal Empire

This is a story of a Baghdadi Jewish family and its diasporic networks leveraging British imperialism in South and East Asia and the international cotton and opium trades to build a modern global business. Meeting Englishmen at the docks, dressed in traditional Baghdadi clothing, David Sassoon's sons persuaded the merchants of their superior access to Middle Eastern markets that could meet Europe's demand for spices, silks, and other luxuries. Historian Joan Roland writes "In this respect, Baghdadis in Bombay in the 1830s defined themselves as 'Jewish merchants of Arabia, inhabitants and residents of Bombay.'" ⁷ Baghdadi Jews like the Sassoons were able to separate themselves from their competition and used their difference to their advantage. An article published in the *North China Herald* in 1873 reported that Baghdadi Jews were "British merchants by accident of Bombay and Calcutta being British possessions," and were "in reality not British merchants but Orientals under British protection." ⁸ Britain's mercantile class saw Jews as an economic asset, and with their allies in Parliament eventually won the passage of laws in the mid-nineteenth century that led to Jewish emancipation in the nation, which had expelled the Jews in 1290.

It was not until David Sassoon sent his third son, Sassoon David, to set up a base for the family business in London in 1858 that the family moved toward being defined as British merchants. A Captain Vincent wrote to Sassoon David Sassoon in Shanghai in 1861, telling him "Whatever you touch turns to gold, for you have, what is vulgarly called in England, 'the Devil's

⁷ Roland, *Jews in British India*, 124.

⁸ *North China Herald*, September 7, 1873.

own luck.”⁹ The statement reveals many English perceptions of the Sassoons: one, the fascination with their enormous wealth, and two, the anti-Semitism that has always followed Jewish engagement with capitalism. This chapter looks at the mechanics of the family’s business growth in the context of the development of informal British empire and free trade policies.

Unlike the Rothschilds and other wealthy Jewish families that grew to prominence through banking in Europe during the nineteenth century, the Sassoon’s wealth came from their trading empire formed through centuries of commercial expertise in the Middle East. Stanley Jackson, a family friend and biographer of the Sassoons, wrote in his work *The Sassoon Dynasty*, published in 1968, that “It is usual to refer to the Sassoons as the Rothschilds of the East. They were nothing of the kind. In the first place, the Rothschilds were essentially financiers, whereas the Sassoons were essentially merchants, with subsidiary interests as manufacturers.”¹⁰ This distinction as merchants, important as it differentiates them from other prominent Jewish families in England at the time, followed the Sassoons in their daily lives and even their explications of their own identities.

In 1829, after a series of persecutions by the Pasha Daud in Baghdad, David Sassoon fled to the port town of Bushehr, Persia barely escaping with his life. Bombay, an amalgamation of several underdeveloped islands when David Sassoon arrived in 1832, had been in British hands since 1774 through the East India Company. The development of the burgeoning port did not begin in earnest until 1817. David Sassoon began his business purchasing goods from the Middle East to be sold in Britain and procuring Lancashire cotton in return to sell on the international

⁹ Captain Vincent to Solomon Sassoon in 1861. arc. 4°1790, box 7. (1830), David Sassoon Archive (hereafter DSA). National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹⁰ Stanley Jackson, *The Sassoons: Portrait of a Dynasty* (London: Heinemann, 1989), 11.

market.¹¹ His trade routes, held together by his extensive family networks, stretched from London to Shanghai. He did business through the networks of old Jewish communities throughout the Middle East from Basra, Iraq up into Shiraz, Iran.

The Sassoon's story of socio-economic mobility and imperial acceptance followed the model of the Port Jew, which was the model of the acceptable or useful Jew that gained readmission to West and Central Europe after medieval expulsions. Modern debates on Jewish citizenship grew out of ideas of minority toleration based on economic utility to the state. Historian Lois C. Dubin writes that "Port Jews were travelers, strangers, boundary crossers and cultural brokers... purveyors of products... between far and near."¹² Most often these were Jews with Sephardic lineage and involved in merchant trading between Europe and Mediterranean nations during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some scholars believe that the Sassoons' origins, like many Sephardic Jews, began in Toledo, Spain and Venice, Italy, during the Jewish expulsions of the fifteenth century. The family, if they had Sephardic heritage, would have been a part of this long history of diasporic Jewish trade. However, other scholars argue that the Sassoons, like many Baghdadi Jews, had been in Baghdad since the twelfth century as bankers to Mesopotamian rulers. My thesis thus globalizes the Port Jew model, taking a wider lens to studying Jewish engagement with capitalism, toleration, and citizenship.

David Sassoon became the patriarch of the Sassoon Dynasty; whose business spanned the globe and whose prestige in the West rose in less than a century. Most of the family's history follows the business dealings, networking, and international mobility of David Sassoon's two

¹¹ Joan G. Roland, *Jews in British India: Identity in a Colonial Era* (Hanover: Published for Brandeis University Press by University Press of New England, 1989), 15-19 & 241.

¹² Lois Dubin, "'Wings on their Feet' and 'Wings on their Head': Reflections on the Study of Port Jews," in David Cesarani/ Gemma Romaine, eds., *Jews and Port Cities, 1590–1990: Commerce, Community, and Cosmopolitanism* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006), 16.

eldest sons with his first wife, Albert Abdullah David Sassoon and Elias David Sassoon. His eldest son by his second marriage, Sassoon David, being the third eldest, found himself also ushered into the family business though almost twenty years younger than his older brothers and sickly for most of his life. In the later nineteenth century, Albert's son, Edward, united himself in marriage to the Rothschilds and Sassoon David's son married into the Gunzbourg line, both wealthy European Jewish families. Following the Sassoons' migration from Baghdad to India reveals the shifts in British imperial management and policy in South East Asia. As economic policies changed in the metropole, the periphery of the British Empire felt the changes as well that dismantled long-held institutions like the East India Company. The Sassoons capitalized on newly-opened imperial markets in China and global commodity trades from cotton to opium in both competition and collaboration with British traders. The family's rise both economically and socially occurred over little more than half a century, across two continents, and under one informal empire.

Historians John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson coined the description of the economic era of Britain during the mid-to-late nineteenth century as "the imperialism of free trade," where free trade preceded imperial control to create an informal empire.¹³ However, the imperialism of free trade is an oxymoron as true "free trade" competes with imperialism, making it a system in which "free trade" only benefited certain entities within the empire. In addition, they defined imperialism as a "sufficient political function of this process of integrating new regions into the expanding economy."¹⁴ C.R. Fay defined "informal empire" by focusing on the ways that

¹³ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 6, no. 1 (1953): 1-15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 6.

empires of the nineteenth century expanded overseas with or without the means of constitutional dominion.¹⁵ Merchants, traders, and businessmen working within this informal empire could profit off the trade agreements of their chosen empire while also remaining independent. Foreign traders had access to distribution networks in China that British traders had only just discovered. In addition, setting up intermediaries for the commodity trade with Asia, in a geographically prime location like India, put the informal arms of empire closer to their trade without creating the formal ties of dominion.

In 1600 Britain formed the East India Company to compete with Dutch and Portuguese traders. The group stated their intention “to venture in the pretended voyage to the East Indies (the which it may please the Lord to prosper), and the sums that they will adventure,” and their first mission allowed them to establish a base on the Maluku Islands, also known as the Spice Islands.¹⁶ By conducting business through this joint-stock company, England could “impose a centralized and bureaucratically-directed system of exchange and distribution on markets that were traditionally decentralized, fragmented and oriented towards individual efforts.”¹⁷

Company rule did not begin in India until after the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and by 1773 it had established Calcutta as its capital. At the height of its power in 1803, the East India Company had an army twice the size of Britain.¹⁸ By 1818, with the defeat of the Marathas, a significant group in India, British colonialism persisted until 1947 when India gained Independence.

¹⁵ The term has been given authority by Dr C. R. Fay. See *Cambridge History of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1940), II, 399.

¹⁶ Marguerite Eyer Wilbur, *The East India Company: And the British Empire in the Far East*, (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1970), 18.

¹⁷ K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 131.

¹⁸ William Dalrymple, “The East India Company: The Original Corporate Raiders,” *The Guardian* (March 4, 2015). Check that your footnotes conform to Chicago style.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the British Empire imposed policies of mercantilism, which protected its merchants while keeping others out through trade barriers and regulations. The East India Company, in addition to India, colonized parts of South East Asia to create a monopoly of trade in the region. David Sassoon was not the first Jew to enter Bombay nor the first to interact with the East India Company. Over one hundred years prior, in 1689, a member of the East India Company was refused a promotion due to his Jewish heritage. As English records show, “to admit Abraham Navarro into the Bombay Council as being a professed Jew is quite contrary to His Majesty's charter to the Honorable Company for Bombay, which is to govern the same, as near as possible, conformable to the laws of England and you know it is against the law that any Jew have any authority in government.”¹⁹

When the East India Company Act, also known as the Charter Act, passed in 1813, it effectively instated British sovereignty over India and ended the company's trade monopoly, but left restrictions on tea, opium, and other trade with China. Investors of the East India Company began to move away from it and “new merchants like Alexander Baring and Nathan Rothschild adopted a new commercial strategy, looking towards a liberalization of international commerce and away from past restrictive practices.”²⁰ The move toward international commerce benefited trading families like the Sassoons who could act as the middlemen between interests in Britain and its informal empire abroad without the distaste that had come to be associated with conglomerates like the East India Company. In addition, the fact that minorities like Baghdadi

¹⁹ Walter J Fischel, “Bombay in Jewish History in the Light of New Documents from the Indian Archives,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 38/39 (1970): 119-44.

²⁰ Anthony Webster, “The Political Economy of Trade Liberalization: The East India Company Charter Act of 1813,” *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 43, no. 3 (1990): 414.

Jews tended to be independent meant that they did not have to worry about ethnic or religious barriers to entry like natives of India.

Frustrations at home from the corrupt trade monopoly created by the East India Company and the failure of tariffs, like the Corn Laws of 1815, to protect British goods from foreign competition came to a head under Sir Robert Peel's administration when he rose to the office of Prime Minister in 1841. The following years saw several acts pass, like the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, that pushed against mercantilism in favor of free trade. When Britain opened their trade routes and economy to the informal empire, families like the Sassoons had a chance to compete on a global scale, which came at an opportune moment as the Treaty of Nanjing opened five new treaty ports in China. By 1859, furthering the cause of free trade, the East India company was considerably weakened as its possessions were nationalized. Fifteen years later the economic giant of the informal empire shut down. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Britain had changed its imperial strategy to one of free trade as it utilized foreign traders.

The informal empire thrived in Bombay, welcoming people from all over the world to take part in trade with the East. When David Sassoon arrived in Bombay, he would have been greeted by Hindus, Parsees, Armenians, Jews, including the Bene Israel (Native Jew caste), Arabs, Portuguese, and Englishmen. After serving an "apprenticeship" in the Sassoon's firms, many Jewish immigrants to Shanghai and Hong Kong were able to branch out to create their own independent merchant houses. In the twenty-first century, these trade routes still exist in the Golden Triangle, which covers an area of land where Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand meet. Most of the world's illicit opium trade comes from this region and the Golden Crescent which overlaps with Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. During the nineteenth century, merchants like the Sassoons utilized similar routes for trading opium, spices, tea, and other commodities.

After the First Opium War between England and China, Parsee traders, who had dominated trade in India, began to lose ground as new markets in China opened to foreigners after the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842. Historian D. F. Karaka writes that “the Jewish residents of Bombay and Calcutta entered into competition... and succeeded in gradually displacing Parsees in the China trade. While the Parsee merchants of China remained in the old groove, the Jews took better advantage of the new treaty ports in China.”²¹ The Sassoons first entered the opium trade by extending loans to opium cultivators in India and then shipping opium to China themselves by the end of the Second Opium War in 1860.²² They worked with Parsee opium tradesman Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, and Jewish firms E. Gubbay & Co., D.E.I. Ezra & Co., and S. Issac in Calcutta. Their rival firm Jardine Matheson (J.M.) & Co had initially held a majority share in the opium market but were overtaken by the Sassoons in this new era. Scholar Edward LeFevour contends through his research of the J.M. & Co archive housed in the Cambridge Library that:

Since [the David Sassoon & Co. firm] was already established in Calcutta and Singapore, he had a branch at that time at every link in the India-China opium chain except in the coastal system. This link was provided by the extension of Peninsular and Oriental Steamship Company’s services on the coast in the early fifties... By early in 1871, the Sassoon group was acknowledged to be the major holder of opium stocks in India and in China; they were owners and controllers of 70 per cent of the total of all kinds.²³

Even so, the Sassoons were latecomers to the opium market compared to European firms that had only begun to lose their edge due to their distance from both the consumer and supply of the trade. Before the Sassoons gained a foothold in the market, the loose organization of the “Malwa

²¹ D. F. Karaka, *History of the Parsees: Including Their Manners, Customs, Religion and Present Condition* (London: Macmillan 1884), 257-8.

²² Madhavi Thampi, *India and China in the Colonial World*, (London: Routledge, 2017), 40.

²³ Edward LeFevour “Western Enterprise in Late Ch’ing China: A Selective Survey of Jardine, Matheson & Company’s Operations, 1842–1895,” in *Harvard East Asian Monographs* 26, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968), 215.

Opium Syndicate,” which included Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy & Co, Remington & Co, and J.M. & Co, controlled the market’s access to Indian opium. In 1865, J.M. & Co made £300,000 in commissions alone from the trade.²⁴ However, by the 1870s the foreign opium market faced increasing competition from the Chinese market, meaning that many European-based firms completely pulled out of the trade. Between 1860-1870, Malwa opium accounted for one-third of the value of all Bombay’s trade.²⁵

Shanghai has been a key city in maritime trade throughout China’s history from its dynastic reigns to its colonial subjugation. Sitting on the Yangtze River Delta, with access to the Pacific Ocean via the East China Sea, Shanghai is one of the largest ports in the world. The role that Baghdadi Jews, especially the Sassoons, played in the rise of modern Shanghai has often been understated in history. Alliances between Jewish merchants and Chinese natives started with the Silk Road and continued well into the modern era. David Sassoon sent his second son Elias David to open a branch of the family’s business in Shanghai in 1844. By 1867, Elias established the E.D. Sassoon and Company with interests in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Bombay, Baghdad, the Persian Gulf, and Japan. According to scholar Chiara Betta, “The early social and religious life of the Baghdadi Jewish community in Shanghai rotated around the Sassoon firms.”²⁶ Other Jewish merchants like the Kadoories, Hardoons, Ezras, Nissims, and Abrahams followed and took root in Shanghai, eventually joined the ranks of its Western-occupying elite. Journalist Taras Grescoe writes in *Shanghai Grand*, “The first entrepreneurs to really understand

²⁴ LeFevour, “Western Enterprise in Late Ch’ing China,” 19-28.

²⁵ Trocki, *Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy*, 113.

²⁶ Chiara Betta, “From Orientals to Imagined Britons: Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai,” *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 4 (2003): 1002.

the potential of the city's strategic location and access to a large population were Sephardic Jews from the Middle East."²⁷

The table below highlights that opium and cotton as commodities held a similar market share from around 1875-1880. However, by 1885, the market share for opium drastically decreased in favor of cotton. This drop both reflects waning interest in opium from European traders as well as China's own growing domestic market that no longer necessitated foreign imports.

Percentages of Various Goods in Import Value between China & India

<i>Goods</i>	<i>Percentage of total value</i>				
	<i>1875</i>	<i>1880</i>	<i>1885</i>	<i>1890</i>	<i>1895</i>
Opium	32.8	37.2	26.6	18.8	17.9
Cotton Fabrics	34.2	33	40.3	47.5	42.7
Woolen Fabrics	9	9.1	8.4	3.8	3
Metals	6.1	5.5	6.9	6.5	5.1
Sundry goods	17.9	15.2	17.8	23.4	31.3

Table 1.1 Jamieson Consul, "Trade and Commercial Report of Shanghai 1893," found in Madhavi Thampi, *India and China in the Colonial World* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

The decline of the opium trade for the British came by the late nineteenth century even as those addicted in China and throughout Asia had grown exponentially. "Users of the drug were so numerous that foreign opium could not, in 1890 for example, meet the growing demand of China's estimated 15 million opium habituates."²⁸ Historian Jonathan Spence estimates that 105 million pounds of opium would be necessary to satisfy China's growing demand, while the British traders only imported just over 10 million pounds.²⁹ Domestic production of opium had

²⁷ Taras Grescoe, *Shanghai Grand: Forbidden Love and International Intrigue on the Eve of the Second World War* (HarperCollins, 2017), 49.

²⁸ Thomas D Reins, "Reform, Nationalism and Internationalism: The Opium Suppression Movement in China and the Anglo-American Influence, 1900-1908," *Modern Asian Studies* 25, no. 1 (1991): 101-42.

²⁹ Jonathan Spence, "Opium Smoking in Ch'ing China," in Frederic Wakeman Jr. and Carolyn Grant (eds), *Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 174.

gained significant ground in China over foreign production with wider profit margins and fewer costs. Through the declining sales of opium, the Sassoons returned or ventured into different markets throughout the East such as sugar, dyes, silver, and Indian cotton yarn. E.D. Sassoon & Co bought up land throughout Hong Kong, Shanghai, including along the Bund, which they were able to develop at a profit. Sir Victor Sassoon, the son of Jacob who inherited his father's business empire, initiated the real estate boom in the 1920s that transformed Shanghai into the Paris of the East.³⁰

Exports of Cotton 1876-1887

EXPORTS OF COTTON YARNS					
From INDIA to China, Hong-Kong, and Japan.			From ENGLAND to China, Hong-Kong, and Japan.		
From March 31st to March 31st.		lbs.	From December 31st to December 31st.		lbs.
1876-7	...	7,926,710	1876	...	29,838,495
1877-8	...	15,600,201	1877	...	33,067,900
1878-9	...	21,333,508	1878	...	36,467,800
1879-80	...	25,862,474	1879	...	39,025,700
1880-1	...	26,901,346	1880	...	46,425,800
1881-2	...	30,786,304	1881	...	47,479,200
1882-3	...	45,223,000	1882	...	34,391,500
1883-4	...	49,876,606	1883	...	33,499,800
1884-5	...	65,897,183	1884	...	38,856,100
1885-6	...	78,238,471	1885	...	33,061,100
1886-7	...	91,803,444	1886	...	26,930,400
1887-8	...	113,451,000	1887	...	35,354,300

Table 1.2 from the June 29th, 1888 Bombay and Lancashire Cotton Spinning Inquiry. J. Fox. Turner, comp., *Bombay and Lancashire Cotton Spinning Inquiry: Minutes of Evidence and Reports* (Manchester: Publisher Not Identified, 1888), 241.

As the sale of opium became less lucrative further into the nineteenth century, the Sassoons returned their full efforts to cotton where they had initially started. The Sassoons had withstood the cotton panic that hit Bombay after the American Civil War as “they had prudently

³⁰ Taras Grescoe, “The Man Who Changed the Face of Shanghai,” *The New York Times*, October 2, 2014.

avoided stock-piling and were therefore only slightly hit by the fall in cotton prices... The firm strongly represented on the Manchester Cotton Exchange.”³¹ In the early eighteenth century, Indian cotton accounted for twenty-five percent of the global cotton industry, a share which only increased during the nineteenth century.³² With the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, which further connected the West to the East by shortening the sea journey by almost 4,000 miles, the ever-faster steamships used by trading houses like the Sassoon’s had greater profitability. The family invested heavily in the China Steam Navigation Company.³³ They were then able to ship their goods up the Yangtze River in China without the maintenance associated with owning ships. As business ventures grew in the region, David Sassoon & Co, along with other merchants in the East, set up the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) in 1865. This united effort stabilized finance and business in the region, especially after the Taiping Rebellion.

On June 29th, 1888, in front of the Board of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce Committee, Charles J. Sassoon, the son of Elias Sassoon, spoke on the state of the market for Bombay and Lancashire cotton. He told the board that “The population of India are becoming more civilized and if exchange goes in his favor, the Indian will take two shirts where now he only takes one. The more civilized they get, the more clothing they require.”³⁴ C.J. Sassoon’s prediction also reflected the growing attachment to cotton in Europe. Of course, this racialized language toward the native people of India used by C.J. Sassoon, denotes the Sassoons’ alignment with British imperialist forces. Historian Maureen Fennell Mazzaoui writes:

³¹ Jackson, *The Sassoons*, 44.

³² Angus Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy 1820-1992* (OECD Development Centre: Paris, 1995), 30.

³³ Shares in the China Steam Navigation Company from 1861-62 4°1790, box 8b., DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

³⁴ Turner, “June 29th, 1888 Bombay and Lancashire Cotton Spinning Inquiry,” 280.

Beautiful chintzes and muslins attracted the attention of the growing class of Europeans who had the money to purchase them and the desire to flaunt their social status by wearing them. As Indian cottons became ever more fashionable in the eighteenth century, the desire to replace these imports was a powerful incentive to ramping up cotton production in England and eventually to revolutionize it.³⁵

To meet this demand between 1873 and 1874 twenty cotton mills popped up in Bombay. The mill owners of the region banded together to form the Bombay Mill Owners Association by 1875. Just one year before, Albert Sassoon founded the Sassoon Spinning and Weaving Company in Bombay. By the 1920s the Sassoons owned one-tenth of all mills in Bombay.

In 1875, David Sassoon & Co. invested in the first wet dock in Bombay. They later sold the docks to the Bombay Port Trust in 1879, benefiting both the locals and other merchant interests.³⁶ Unlike many colonized regions throughout India or elsewhere, Bombay's (now Mumbai) origins as a major metropolis began with colonialism. "In precolonial times Bombay merely consisted of a few swampy islets. It was the abode of the Koli fishers, whose patron deity, Mumbai, most probably gave this place its name."³⁷ Under the Hornby Vellard project, which began in 1782 and ended 1838, the seven islands of Bombay were linked together by a causeway. The single island which formed was named Old Bombay, with an area of only a little more than 150 square miles. In 1853 the British government funded the first and oldest passenger railway system in Asia, which ran from Colaba (Bombay) to Thane. With the formation of the Bombay Coast and River Steam Navigation Company in 1866, Bombay had all the trappings of a major port town. The David Sassoon & Co took full advantage of the British-funded

³⁵ Maureen Fennell Mazzaoui, *The Italian Cotton Industry in the Later Middle Ages, 1100–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 157.

³⁶ M. V. Kamath, *Tides of Time: History of Mumbai Port* (Mumbai: Mumbai Port Trust, 2000), 83.

³⁷ D. Kooiman, "Bombay: from Fishing Village to Colonial Port City (1662–1947)," in Ross R.J., and G.J. Telkamp (eds) *Colonial Cities. Comparative Studies in Overseas History, vol 5*. (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht: 1985), 1.

infrastructure to sell cotton to the Lancashire mills in Northern England and Chinese merchants through Shanghai.

The rest of the thesis will analyze how the Sassoons capitalized on their difference and cultural networks to become British imperial insiders, and how their economic pursuits shaped Jewish culture. It will end with twentieth-century changes when the Sassoon family in London tried to erase their Jewishness while they still had to contend with perceptions of Jewishness and foreignness by others and themselves.

II. “...He made use of his sons:” Baghdadi Jews and the British Empire

When the Sassoons moved to Bombay, the family held onto their connections in the Baghdadi trading diaspora, which gave them access to global commerce as well as trusted networks from Europe to China. Their commercial skills and networks were a product of their expertise cultural background as Baghdadi Jews, which will be further explored in this chapter. Baghdadi Jews’ economic niche in international commerce was a product of discrimination they faced due to the fact they could not own land in Iraq during feudal times. Thus, culture and context made them especially well-suited to tender trade between the East and the West as trade had been the family’s only financial practice for centuries. In turn, their success shaped their cultural communities and built up communal infrastructure in the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora spread throughout Asia in the nineteenth century. Their investments in their community reinforced their ethnic and religious identities, which in turn strengthened their business networks by building a trusted workforce. Discounting essentialist arguments about a Jewish affinity for capitalism, the Sassoons’ upward economic mobility in the nineteenth century was intimately tied to their sub-ethnic Baghdadi Jewish identity, including language, kinship, and networks of trust.

Unlike elite Jewish families such as the Rothschilds who began their careers in European courts, the Sassoon family began their economic journey in the Middle East. For this thesis, the Sassoons will be referred to as Baghdadi Jews due to their specificity and their strong connection with their heritage. Some early historical records trace the Sassoons to the region of modern-day Iraq as early as the time of the Mesopotamian rulers; others follow their expulsion from Spain after the Inquisition’s Royal Decrees of 1492 and 1502. Whether or not the Sassoons’ lineage

comes from Spain, their connection with these exiles along the Silk Road brought them in close contact with the advances of European and Islamic societies such as skills in banking, medicine, diplomacy, and European languages. Many Sephardic Jews settled in the Ottoman Empire post-expulsion since “The Spanish Jews’ knowledge of commodity and money markets, and the use of bills of exchange and checks, as well as their skilled workmanship in the production of luxury goods, provided valuable expertise to the new Ottoman elite.”³⁸ Whether or not the Sassoons have Sephardi heritage or worked for Mesopotamian rulers long before the expulsion, the Sassoon family gained these valuable skills by working as court bankers for officials in Baghdad and meeting with Sephardi communities throughout the Ottoman Empire.

In Iraqi courts, Jews had access to these select positions of power until the end of the eighteenth century when officials and elites in Baghdad began to war with one another. Historical records show that “Sheikh Sason,” the patriarch of the Sassoon line in Baghdad, “[could not] show himself or go about freely because of the fear of the Governor of the city, cursed be his name” in 1772.³⁹ However, by 1778, he became *Nasi* (Prince) to the Baghdadi Jewish community which he led for almost forty years through eight different governors. The Jewish community’s fortunes rose and fell with the city’s, as both were reliant on benevolent governments and elites. All the way back to the medieval Islamic world, especially the golden age from the 8th through 11th centuries, Jews “were part of the population of Western Asia, North Africa, and Iberia, now called Al-Andalus, where medieval Arabo-Islamic culture developed as an amalgamation of Arabic language, Islamic religion, and local culture. Jews were

³⁸ Reeva S. Simon and Michael M. Laskier, eds., “Economic Life,” in Reeva S. Simon, Michael M. Laskier, and Sara Reguer, eds. *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 33.

³⁹ Jackson, *The Sassoons*, 6.

an intrinsic part of this culture.”⁴⁰ Middle Eastern culture in the early modern period, unlike Europe, represented cultural values which allowed for the integration of Jewish people and other minority groups as second-class-citizens into the broader society and positively valued commerce.

Through this integration, Middle Eastern Jews, today referred to as Mizrahi in Israel as a marker of difference from European Jews, could freely travel throughout the region and even gain employment in niche markets unavailable to their European counterparts. “Unlike Christian Europe, where Jewish landownership became virtually impossible under feudalism, Muslim rule provided a variety of economic parameters...As time passed, Jews tended to opt out of agriculture, because the double taxation—both on land (*kharaj*) and on Jews as dhimmis (*jizya*)—proved too onerous.”⁴¹ While Jews in the Middle East had fewer restrictions, they were still governed by harsh taxes on land-owning which pushed them into specific niches outside of the realm of traditional feudalism and agriculture. In the local economy, they worked in specific niche markets that were unsavory to Muslims or Christians but still needed by the local authorities. In turn, these local authorities granted the Jewish community a semblance of protective status.

While other groups gained skills based in feudal systems like agriculture and warfare, Jews learned skills in economic endeavors that benefited them in the age of modern empires and global capital. In the region, Jews also worked in religious occupations as ritual slaughterers (*shohet*) or scribes (*sofer*), serving both the Jewish and Muslim communities. As scribes, they

⁴⁰ Raymond P Scheindlin, “Merchants and intellectuals, Rabbis and Poets: Judeo-Arabic Culture in the Golden Age of Islam,” in David Biale, ed. *Cultures of the Jews: Volume III: Modern Encounters* (New York: Schocken Books, 2006), 317.

⁴¹ Reeva S. Simon, and Michael M. Laskier, eds., “Economic Life,” in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, 30.

gained access to the intelligentsia in the Middle East and began their formation of the Judeo-Arabic language. Their connection to textiles also signifies a religious bent: because of the “Jewish observance of the biblical proscription against mixing linen and wool, Jewish agents purchased wool in the countryside, and Jews spun, dyed, wove, and finished the cloth.”⁴² The Sassoons traded spices, textiles, jewelry, and raw goods along traditional routes that spread from Egypt to the Persian Gulf and beyond. They spoke Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, and Persian with their many connections in the region. David Sassoon and his brothers, during their time in Baghdad, went out “Early each day... to the crowded *souks* to report the arrival of goods, noting market trends and learning to calculate in different currencies, weights and measures.”⁴³ Their day-to-day interactions with global commerce gave them a wealth of knowledge, one which had been passed down from generation to generation and gained through practical work.

Their relative freedom in Baghdad garnered the Jewish community’s embrace of the city as their homeland and allowed for some of their members to continue their rise within the elite formation of modern Iraq. “The economic and social prominence of the Jewish elite, their integration into the newly established Iraqi state and the community’s embrace of Arabic were the basis for the ‘Iraqi orientation’ adopted by the great majority of Jews.”⁴⁴ The Jewish community’s adoption of an Arab identity reduced some of the stigmas of otherness associated with their Jewish identity. “Iraqi Jews were Arabized. Their language was Arabic, and they shared similar superstitions, cuisine, and dress.”⁴⁵ The Sassoons, during their time in Baghdad, married their Jewish identity with an Arab identity both due to their long-standing history in the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Jackson, *The Sassoons*, 4.

⁴⁴ Nissim Rejwan, *The Last Jews in Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), xiv (Foreword by Joel Beinin).

⁴⁵ Reeva S. Simon, “Iraq,” in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, 355.

region as well as for stability and safety. They used similar strategies when their commercial ventures spread them globally. Already possessing this skill set allowed them to meet the demands of the ever-growing global market during the nineteenth century.

In their communities, life in the Jewish Diaspora centered around religious life, which was controlled by the elderly men of the community. The mikveh, the school, hospital, and inn were all housed within the larger community synagogue. Often this synagogue's funding came from families like the Sassoons, which were both pious and wealthy. These families "often traveled with an entourage of Jewish ritual functionaries such as a *shohet* (ritual slaughterer), a kosher cook, a *hazan* (cantor) to lead prayers, and an *istadh* (a melamed to European Jews), whose numbers helped to augment the small communities."⁴⁶ For many Jews, the bond between culture and economy could not be separated. When wealth or privileges were bestowed upon one community member, the community expected a form of *tzedakah* (charity) or *ma'sar kesafim* (percentage of wealth) to be given to Jewish community endeavors and often to benefit the poor. "Families like the Sassoons constituted only 5 percent of the Jewish community. The great majority, like their urban Muslim and Christian neighbors, were either poor or small merchants, artisans, and white-collar employees of middling income."⁴⁷ Even after the Sassoons moved from Baghdad to Bombay, Shanghai, or London, they continued to give money to develop the Jewish community in Iraq well into the twentieth century due to its place as their nostalgic homeland.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Myer Samra, "Migration Patterns of Iraqi Jews," in M. Avrum Ehrlich ed. *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora. Origins, Experiences, and Culture* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 355.

⁴⁷ Nissim Rejwan, *The Last Jews in Baghdad*, xxi.

⁴⁸ Seen throughout the archive. 4°1790, DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

When David Sassoon fled Baghdad in 1829, he left his community, his family, and his fortune behind. “Those who had left Iraq for the East were sometimes referred to by the term *al-marhum*, which is generally used for a person who has died...simply by leaving to settle in a faraway place from which they were unlikely ever to return.”⁴⁹ David, however, escaped on the tails of other Baghdadi Jews who had seen the familiar political instability in Baghdad and, with the new Pasha’s imperial mandate cracking down on dissent, had fled to Persia. Landing in the port city of Bushehr, David Sassoon was “lent a little stock and guaranteed...credit” from “Samuel Zacharia, a prosperous merchant who had come originally from Shiraz.”⁵⁰ Similar tales of assistance marked many Baghdadi Jewish families’ upward economic mobility when they arrived in a new homeland. By the 1860s, it would be the Sassoons that helped their fellow Baghdadi Jews prosper in India and China.

In 1832, David Sassoon along with other Baghdadi Jews arrived in Bombay as a community of outsiders. “Jewish traders from other parts of the Middle East who settled in these locations tended to assimilate into the Baghdadi communities rather than establish separate ones.”⁵¹ Baghdadi Jews worked with Persian Jews, Turkish Jews, and North African Jews along long-established networks and trade routes. Due to the strength of the Baghdadi diaspora, language fluency, and their perceived difference from the natives of India, the Sassoons’ trading circles outpaced the native Hindus’ and Parsees’ within the British empire.⁵² The Parsees, an Indian sect of Zoroastrians that had fled Persia in the seventh and eighth centuries, welcomed the Baghdadi Jews for whom they had some cultural affinity. Shortly after his arrival, David Sassoon

⁴⁹ Samra, *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora*, 356.

⁵⁰ Jackson, *The Sassoons*, 10.

⁵¹ Samra, *Ibid.* 355.

⁵² LeFevour, “Western Enterprise in Late Ch’ing China,” 215.

brought his wife and children to Bombay. Other members of the Baghdadi Jewish community, which his father had watched over for almost half a century, followed suit.

Over the next several decades, families that remained connected to the Sassoons into the twentieth century like the Gubbays, Nissims, Ezras, Zacharias, Ezekiels, and the Gabbais, joined the ever-growing Baghdadi-Jewish community in India. David Sassoon, with pride in his Judeo-Arabic heritage and tutelage in leadership from his father, “imposed himself as the charismatic head of the local community of Baghdadi Jews. The latter definition in Bombay included not only Jews from Baghdad but also from more distant Ottoman lands such as Aleppo and Aden and even Jews from Persia.”⁵³ David Sassoon steadfastly clung to his roots as a Baghdadi Jew and “never spoke English or wore European dress.”⁵⁴ Even in his last will, written January of 1862, of himself he wrote “Jewish merchant, made manner and form.”⁵⁵ His sons, who later moved to England, acculturated and even took on English names, Abdullah becoming Albert and Abraham becoming Arthur.

⁵³ Chiara Betta, “From Orientals to Imagined Britons,” 1001.

⁵⁴ Jackson, *The Sassoons*, 218.

⁵⁵ Will of David Sassoon, January 1862. 4°1790, box 7 (1860), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.



Circa 1850 (shortly after the Indian Mutiny), David Sassoon (seated) and his sons Elias David, Albert (Abdallah) & Sassoon David (wearing European-styled clothing, he went on to open the firm's London branch)

Networks of Trust

Although Bombay was different from the insular and tightknit community of his homeland in every way, David Sassoon found familiarity in the trade routes of the silk road as well as the influx of other Baghdadi Jews following in his footsteps. As historian Ruth Fredman Cemea points out, certain aspects of Jewish culture “for example, the prohibition against intermarriage and the use of a common language fed the creation of long-distance trade

connections among the Baghdadis.”⁵⁶ The cultural and familial interconnectedness benefited the Sassoon family enormously throughout the nineteenth century during the development of their global business, which followed the trajectory of many successful trading diasporas. “Baghdadis in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Subaraya, Rangoon, Calcutta, and Bombay were in constant contact with each other” remarked Israel Cohen, who conducted several studies of Jewish communities in China, India, and Australia for the World Zionist Organization in the early twentieth century; “... (they) were almost as familiar with each other as the Jews of Manchester were with those of Liverpool.”⁵⁷

Exclusion from wider European trading circles had marked the Jewish trading diaspora for centuries. Josiah Child, a Governor of the East India Company, argued in the seventeenth century that “The Jews are a subtil people . . . depriving the English merchant of that profit he would otherwise gain; they carry on their business to the prejudice of the English merchants.”⁵⁸ Childs’ fear and envy of about Jewish merchants taking employment away from European traders permeated the nineteenth century as questions of Jewish citizenship arose in many European empires. With the advent of globalization, “[a] process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and people become increasingly aware they are receding,” these tensions were only heightened.⁵⁹ By acting within networks of trust, firms like the Sassoons’ could avoid some of these tensions while also working more efficiently on a global scale. The networks of trust utilized by the Sassoon family parallel many Jewish

⁵⁶ Ruth Fredman Cemea, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 173.

⁵⁷ I. Cohen, *A Jewish Pilgrimage: The Autobiography of Israel Cohen* (London: Valentine, Mitchell, 1956), 195.

⁵⁸ Josiah Child, *A New Discourse of Trade: Wherein Are Recommended Several Weighty Points, Relating to Companies of Merchants ...* (London: Printed for J. Hodges, on London-Bridge, 1740), 152.

⁵⁹ Malcolm Waters, *Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2001), 3.

firms' "exceptionalism" in business. The exceptionalism can be explained by the fact that most Jews never did business as singular traders in a broader non-Jewish market but instead had an extended market through the Jewish diaspora like other ethnic trading diasporas.

Jews operating within European empires in Asia tended to cluster in certain economic policies, especially mercantilism, to avoid marginalization or exclusion in non-Jewish markets. Key centers in Asia included Bombay, Rangoon, Calcutta, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore, which, attracted very few European settlers beyond administrators, merchants and the military. Within this framework, ethnic trading diasporas, like the Baghdadi Jews, were able to prosper in a relatively stable political climate as long as they showed loyalty to their Imperial overseers, most often through profits.⁶⁰ Networks of trust, family, and community held paramount importance within this system of imperial dominion. While David Sassoon sent his sons abroad, they stayed connected with their families as much as they did their businesses as both functioned in tandem.

Both Solomon Sassoon and Elias Sassoon, who were frequently stationed in China for the firm, often expressed sentiments of homesickness in their correspondence. Solomon Sassoon wrote to his brother Elias in 1846 from Bombay to China, "I know that you feel rather strange in China at present. However, you will soon be accustomed to the country in a few months more..."⁶¹ During the winter of 1869, Mozelle Sassoon wrote to her brother, Solomon Sassoon, from Bombay, "We miss your agreeable company very much not being quite satisfied with your stay in Bombay which was only for a few days and as we got accustomed to you we felt very

⁶⁰ Adam Mendelsohn, "Not the Retiring Kind: Jewish Colonials in England in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," in Katz, Ethan B., Lisa Moses Leff, and Maud S. Mandel, eds. *Colonialism and the Jews* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017), 88-90.

⁶¹ Solomon Sassoon to his brother Elias Sassoon in China in 1846. 4°1790, box 8b. 1 (6148), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

much grieved when you left for China to a place where you have resided many a year.”⁶² Never before had global communication been so readily available and as fast as in the nineteenth century. This modernization benefited the Sassoons, who were spread from London to Shanghai, enabling them to keep in contact with their business, family, and cultural networks which were overlapping and interdependent. As some of the first Jews in China since the Kaifeng Jews, who had arrived as early as the tenth century along the Silk Road, these trusted networks helped the David Sassoon & Co. firm adapt to their new environments. The support from family and community members abroad allowed Jewish firms like the Sassoons’ to engage in commerce and financing through long-distance trade more easily than groups without these connections. In addition, these Jewish trading communities relied upon each other and provided inter-community policing that protected their interests. The Sassoons, while mostly trading British and Indian goods, did not just act as middlemen for the British Empire but often competed with them.⁶³ Jewish firms frequently worked in tandem with each other, strengthening their networks. Even when E.D. Sassoon established his own firm in 1867, he rarely competed with his father’s firm until well into the 1880s, and it is unlikely that he would have started his firm during his father’s lifetime (he passed away in 1864).

Compared to other trading groups, these networks of trust “were more readily fostered by Jews, who by virtue of their religion were subject to prejudice and exclusion by the larger, gentile society, and who felt a sense of community and commonality with other Jews, whether from shared religious commitment, or common culture, or involuntarily shared fate.”⁶⁴ Arthur

⁶² Letter from Mozelle Sassoon to Solomon Sassoon in 1869. 4°1790, box 8b. 1 (6158), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

⁶³ Amiya Kumar Bagchi, “Reflections on the Nature of the Indian Bourgeoisie,” *Social Scientist* 19, no. 3/4 (1991): 11.

⁶⁴ Jerry Z. Muller, *Capitalism and the Jews* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 91.



Ohel Rachel Synagogue circa 1920 or 1930

Sassoon, writing from Bombay to his brother Solomon in Hong Kong in the spring of 1857, mentions the extensive business renovations done by the firm in Bombay and asks about the trade in China. He ends his letter,

“Please excuse my writing in haste as

I have no leisure. Tomorrow being Passover Feast.”⁶⁵ Much of the correspondence among family members, like the letter highlighted here, reveals their global connectivity as well as their shared religious and cultural values. In diasporic Jewish trading firms, religion and business went hand in hand in shaping community networks. While European firms underpaid Jewish employees if they even hired them, firms like David Sassoon & Co. offered their Jewish employees community gathering points for religious and cultural life as well as better pay abroad. As the center of the diasporic Baghdadi Jewish community in China, David Sassoon & Co. worked to strengthen networks of trust along religious and cultural value systems. David Sassoon & Co. funded the building of the Beth El Synagogue in Shanghai in 1887 for the Sephardic Jewish community which had begun to arrive in 1848. In 1920, Sir Jacob Sassoon built the Ohel Rachel Synagogue in memory of his wife, and it remains one of only two out of seven remaining today.

“Like a good fellow look after my brother in Hankow and let him make something of himself,” wrote Louis A. Joseph, a Jewish agent at the firm in China, to Solomon Sassoon in

⁶⁵ Letter from Arthur Sassoon to Solomon Sassoon in 1857. 4°1790, box 7. (1567), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

1867.⁶⁶ This sort of remark permeates the Sassoon family's business correspondence as they are asked for favors, introductions, and to take care of young men lost in the Far East. David Sassoon & Co. was known to pay "the best wages and pioneered welfare schemes for workers and their families, including more and more non-Jews in the coming years."⁶⁷ Many Jewish clerks who had begun their careers in the Sassoon offices in China later went on to form their own firms, thereby adding to the networks of trust. David Sassoon's start, as highlighted previously, shows how Jewish networks supported their communities and gave them an advantage in global trade. In the nineteenth century, the letter of introduction was an important part of social interaction, and, in the world of business, it could represent monetary transactions, favors, and trade connections. Throughout their correspondence, the Sassoons are asked for letters of introduction similar to L.A. Joseph's and ask for those same letters from others. As firms set up headquarters in China, the importance of networks of trust became paramount as the distance between home and business grew. By the end of the nineteenth century, "more than twenty Jewish firms of Baghdad origin, such as the Sassoon, Shaasha, and Zuluf families, had houses in Manchester; the Bikhor and Salih families operated in Bombay and London; and Sir Elly S. Kadoorie had firms in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and London."⁶⁸

When the Sassoons established their firms in Bombay and Shanghai, their only security lay in the laws of the British Empire over its periphery. "In underdeveloped economies where the legal framework is underdeveloped, one observes the ubiquity of personalistic trading networks

⁶⁶ Letter from Louis A. Joseph to Solomon Sassoon in 1867 from Bombay. 4°1790, box 8b. 1 (6852), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

⁶⁷ Jackson, *The Sassoons*, 56.

⁶⁸ Reeva S. Simon, and Michael M. Laskier, eds., "Economic Life," in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, 38.

that manifest themselves in homogeneous trading groups.”⁶⁹ For the Sassoons, whose citizenship and protections existed in a grey status in the periphery of the British Empire, these homogenous trading groups were necessary for survival. Through this ethnic trading diaspora, which crossed the boundaries of nations and empires, Jewish communities developed centuries of expertise as a merchant minority that they could then transfer from one generation to the next. Historians call these cultural traits, formed during times of persecution and the necessity of economic survival, “cultural capital.” Scholar Jerry Z. Muller writes that “Jews had the behavioral traits conducive to success in a capitalist society. They entered commercializing societies with a stock of know-how from their families and communities about how markets work.”⁷⁰ These networks of trust between Jewish communities, based on shared religious values and culture, allowed the Sassoons to set up satellite firms around the globe efficiently. Mainly, the Sassoons developed these ties with Baghdadi Jewish communities with whom they shared a language and cultural ties, in other words, a shared sub-ethnicity within the broader Jewish diaspora.

The David Sassoon & Co. firm often hired other Baghdadi Jews as well as Jews from Persia, Yemen, and Syria who migrated to India and China during the nineteenth century. They had been attracted by the Sassoons’ success, word of which traveled back to Jewish communities through the same networks of trust. In 1894, Sir Albert received a letter from John Oswald Simon, a Jewish reformer in England, about a destitute J. Abady of Baghdad who had originally worked for the David Sassoon & Co. firm in Bombay. Simon imparts to Sir Albert the societal expectation “that they [The London Jewish Community] should [not] be charged with the care of a coreligionist who is related to a family who occupy the standing and the prestige which belongs

⁶⁹ Janet Tai Landa, *Trust, Ethnicity, and Identity: Beyond the New Institutional Economics of Ethnic Trading Networks, Contract Law, and Gift-exchange* (Nachdr., 1998), 115.

⁷⁰ Muller, *Capitalism and the Jews*, 88.

to the Sassoons.”⁷¹ While the Sassoons’ network of trust expanded into European Jewish communities, they still expected to be leaders for the Baghdadi Jewish community that had followed them from Iraq to India to China and finally to England.

In England, the Sassoons worked with Jewish families like the Rothschilds along similar networks of trust. They continued to rely upon Jewish diasporic networks as they navigated European society and its distrust of Jews. Arthur Sassoon wrote to his nephew Edward Sassoon in February of 1894 that “Flora Solomon’s [Sassoon] letter came duly to hand... I sent it to Rueben [Sassoon] to read and destroy... and I am now sending it to Gubbay in Bath... Evidently Flora does not think much of the Elgins but let us hope that ‘Handsome is that Handsome does’ (I think that is the saying) and that we may have a more prosperous time in his reign than that of his predecessor.”⁷² Arthur Sassoon refers to Victor Alexander Bruce, 9th Earl of Elgin, 13th Earl of Kincardine who, like his father before him, was appointed as the Viceroy of India in 1894. The policies of his predecessor, Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, 5th Marquess of Lansdowne, in India from 1888 to 1894 had only intensified the tensions between Hindus and Muslims in the region. This piece of correspondence highlights the multifaceted nature of the Sassoons’ networks of trust. On the one hand, it reflects their reliance on family information and their ability to pass that information to other Baghdadi Jews within their network, Mr. Gubbay in this instance. On the other hand, it shows how they navigated the politics of the British Empire as it affected their international business ventures while remaining in England.

As the Sassoons’ business ventures expanded throughout the nineteenth century, the necessity of networks of trust only increased as they did business outside of their Baghdadi

⁷¹ Letter from Sir John Oswald Simon to Sir Albert Sassoon in 1894. 4°1790, box 8a. (5271), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

⁷² Letter from Arthur Sassoon to Edward Sassoon 1894. 4°1790, box 8a. (5007), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

community. They were able to enforce business contracts abroad through mechanisms of trust supported by religious, family, and community institutions. “Intergenerational legacies [Jewish diasporic trading families] induce merchants to deal honestly through their very last transaction, so that their children may inherit valuable livelihoods.”⁷³ The unifying commonality among Jewish merchants trading in Asia was their religious ethnicity, which, along with their Jewish education and socialization towards trades with portable goods, acted as an advantage with human capital that contributed to their success in trade between China and Britain. Networks of trust, along community and religious lines, allowed Jewish merchants like the Sassoons to manage the industry’s assorted demands such as credit flow, global access to other Jewish trading diasporas, and family networks that supported the acquisition of specific skills from their time trading in the Middle East.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Sassoons contributed to charitable Jewish causes, thereby furthering their prominence in the international Jewish community. Jewish philanthropy in the nineteenth century became a movement for global solidarity in a diasporic Jewish population. Unlike Jews of the seventeenth and eighteenth century who helped members of their small communities through *shtadlanut*, wealthy Jews of the nineteenth century wished to impact Jewish emancipation globally as seen in scholarship by historian Abigail Green.

Alliance Israélite Universelle, a Jewish organization, founded in Paris in 1860 that promoted Jewish self-sufficiency in the Ottoman Empire through education, worked with the Sassoons to create a school in Baghdad. In 1870 they wrote to David Sassoon & Co. that:

the property at Bagdad bequeathed by our dear father the late Mr. David Sassoon to his heirs (which consists as we understand of a house) still remains undivided and that if this

⁷³ Barak D. Richman, “How Community Institutions Create Economic Advantage: Jewish Diamond Merchants in New York,” *Law & Social Inquiry*, 31 (2006): 383.

building could be given over for the purposes of the said School, it would be a great boon for that Institution as it is to be called after the name of Sassoon. The gift would moreover tend to perpetuate the name memory of the original owner and be an appropriate tribute to his worth.⁷⁴

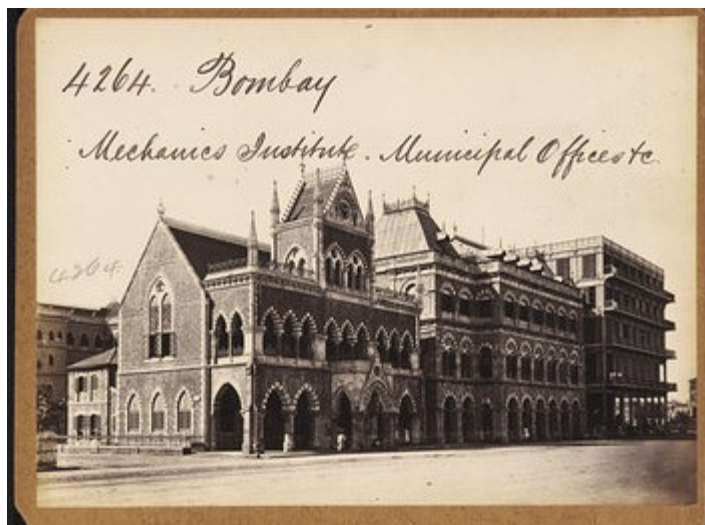
The Sassoons agreed to the formation of this school in Baghdad by the Alliance. In addition to the prestige factor, this act of generosity attracted community members to work at their firms and trade fairly with them. They established synagogues, hospitals, and charitable endowments for Jews throughout the Middle East and India. Later in the century, the firm opened these institutions to non-Jews as well.

The Jewish schools established by the Sassoon family in Baghdad and Bombay provided workers for the firms as well as community points of gathering. In addition, they negotiated on behalf of Jewish communities and provided them with a head start on their acculturation to Western languages and education programs that included English, mathematics, history, literature, and science. Keeping with their cultural beginnings, the Sassoons' schools also taught Arabic and offered "apprenticeship program for aspiring artisans... training poorer Jewish youth to be tailors, boot makers, weavers, and carpenters, more lucrative occupations than the traditional goldsmithing, silversmithing, and coppersmithing."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Correspondence between David Sassoon & Co. and R.D. Sassoon for the Alliance Israélite Universelle in 1870. 4°1790, box 8a. (6000 (copy)), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

⁷⁵ Reeva S. Simon, "Iraq," in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, 360.

In 1847, Europeans living in Bombay founded the Mechanics Institute to provide technical training and education to adults of the region. They sourced funding from David Sassoon, and eventually, their lecture space became the David Sassoon Library in 1883. “[David Sassoon] spent over £100,000 on public benefactions alone...even before the boom of the sixties...He built synagogues and Hebrew Schools in Byculla and Poona.”⁷⁶ These cultural centers, which often taught Judeo-Arabic, kept archives of Jewish written materials and supported Jewish education in Bombay by helping the



Bombay. Mechanics Institute. Municipal Offices circa 1860 by Francis Firth (now the David Sassoon Library)

Baghdadi Jewish community retain their cultural compass while also preparing them for the increasingly globalized world. The process of acculturation at these schools, implemented and funded by the Sassoons, preserved many small Baghdadi Jewish communities from total assimilation to their new homelands.

While charity or *tzedakah* had always been a part of Jewish culture, philanthropy in the nineteenth century was a particular combination of advocacy and plutocracy. Moses Montefiore, a Sephardic Jew in England, exemplified the model of a Jewish elite leveraging international public opinion via the press and humanitarian campaigns. Philanthropy became a part of the “emancipation politics” practiced by figures like the Sassoon family by the time they immigrated to England in the mid-nineteenth century. As historian David Sorkin writes, “Emancipation and

⁷⁶ Jackson, *The Sassoons*, 33.

civil society, voluntary associations and the press, combined with a cross-confessional humanitarianism, had created entirely new conditions for politics.”⁷⁷ These new conditions of Jewish politics led to a new form of *shtadlanut* that was neither the same as it had been in previous eras nor completely new. Jewish philanthropy, like philanthropy within many different communities during the nineteenth century, was an elite concern. Historian Abigail Green writes that the “Jewish International” was “a role that is entirely consistent with the broad contours of non-Jewish politics and the “bourgeois” nature of the public sphere in mid-nineteenth century Europe.”⁷⁸ While native-born European elite Jews’ philanthropy often functioned as a bourgeois activity that impacted Jews abroad more often than in Europe, the Sassoons were mainly concerned with the plight of poor Baghdadi Jews across their diasporic networks. Many of their philanthropic ventures worked to give their community the tools to raise themselves in society by focusing predominately on education, healthcare, and orphanages in Bombay, Baghdad, and Shanghai in particular.

Language

From the inception of the firm in the 1830s, much of the business correspondence came in Judeo-Arabic.⁷⁹ This vernacular dialect sometimes referred to as Yehudic, emerged within Jewish communities dispersed throughout the medieval Mediterranean. Until about 1200 CE, scholars estimate that ninety percent of the Jews lived in this region. Saadiah Gaon, an Iraqi rabbi, translated the Bible into Judeo-Arabic in the tenth century, which was called the *tafsīr*. His

⁷⁷ David Sorkin, “Montefiore and the Politics of Emancipation,” *The Jewish Review of Books* (Summer 2010): 23.

⁷⁸ Abigail Green, *Moses Montefiore: Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 168.

⁷⁹ Seen throughout the family and business correspondence. 4°1790, DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

work moved Judeo-Arabic away from a phonetically written language to one modeled after classical Arabic.⁸⁰ Similar to Yiddish (Judeo-German), spoken by Jews in Eastern Europe, Judeo-Arabic represents the ways that the lexicon of Judeo-Arabic incorporated numerous loanwords and phrases from Hebrew and Aramaic. In Baghdad, the Jews spoke a different Judeo-Arabic than those in Yemen or Egypt. For the David Sassoon & Co. firm, language was crucial to their business success and acumen. “Special, often highly hebraized, varieties of Jewish languages... were used as secret jargons during trade or when Jews found themselves in potentially dangerous situations and they suspected that the non-Jews present understood their ordinary language or vernacular.”⁸¹ In the family archive, housed in Jerusalem, Israel, much of their business correspondence is written in Judeo-Arabic. Not only did this reduce potential competitor threats but it helped solidify the ecosystem of a trusted network of Judeo-Arabic speakers.

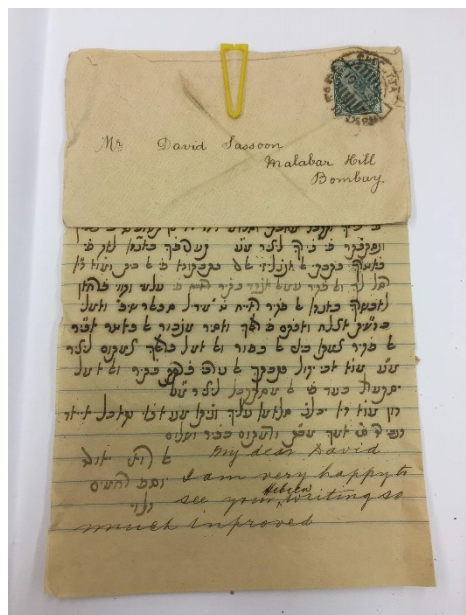
In 1898 the David Sassoon & Co. office in Leadenhall, London, communicated with the office in Bombay about their choice of language for business correspondence. By the 1890s, the branch of the firm in London no longer communicated fully in Judeo-Arabic. The London firm encouraged the Bombay branch to organize “on a European basis all the interior work should be conducted in English while correspondence with native constituents would be in their vernacular language... The younger branches of the families of the Partners are being brought up in European methods- in the course of time the business must pass into their hands.”⁸² Language

⁸⁰ Benjamin Hary, “il-‘Arabi Dyālna (Our Arabic): The History and Politics of Judeo-Arabic.” In *Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Miller Joshua L. and Norich Anita, 297-320. (ANN ARBOR: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 9-10.

⁸¹ David M. Bunis, Joseph Chetrit, and Haideh Sahim, “Jewish Languages Enter the Modern Era,” in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, 114.

⁸² Business correspondence from the London office of David Sassoon & Co. to the Bombay office in 1898. 4°1790, box 8b. 1 (6795 (copy) 6596 (original)), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

is a facet of cultural presentation, and as the Sassoons grew distant from their Baghdadi roots, from more than half a century prior, their connection to the language waned as well. At the turn of the century, the Sassoons had established themselves as a powerhouse in Europe and to connect further with that base market they moved to run their businesses in English. Scholar Jefferey Shandler explains that “The decline in the routine use of Yiddish and of other diasporic Jewish languages [like Judeo-Arabic], especially in spoken form, are both consequences and symbols of other losses: ruptures in intergenerational continuity and the erosion of Jewish sociocultural distinctiveness.”⁸³ During the nineteenth century, the Sassoons’ cultural language (Judeo-Arabic) came to function as the symbol of their otherness in both Jewish European and English culture. The family went to great lengths to educate themselves in European languages and culture to acculturate to their new society.



To Mr. David Sassoon (Malabar Hill, Bombay)
 "I am happy to see your Hebrew writing much improved." (circa 1890)

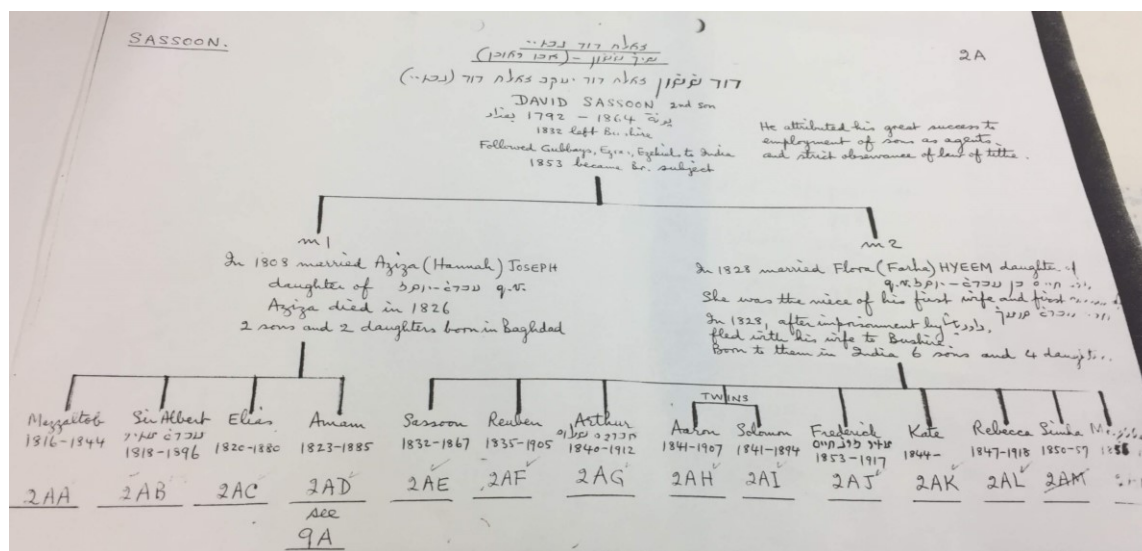
Up until the 1940s, branches of the Sassoon family continued to be able to write in Judeo-Arabic. In many family correspondences, it became the role of the older members to educate the younger members about the language. The transmission of culture through language often came with an elderly member asking the children of the family to write to them in Arabic or show their handwriting in Hebrew.⁸⁴ By doing this, the family kept the language alive even as English or foreign tongues

⁸³ Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 129.

⁸⁴ Hebrew correspondence to David Sassoon (most likely b. 1880, d. 1929) in circa 1890. 4°1790, box 33ב., DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

increasingly surrounded them. Writing in 1871 from Folkstone, England, to her mother in India, Rachel Sassoon mentions that they “received [her] letter in Arabic;” she also mentions the presence of her French governess.⁸⁵ Intersecting the Sassoons’ old lives in Baghdad as well as the family’s new appreciation for European culture, this letter in the family correspondence reflects how linguistic assimilation did not displace the now symbolic importance of Judeo-Arabic in the family’s identity.

Gender and Kinship



A rough sketch of David Sassoon's family tree, undated, found in the DSA in Jerusalem, Israel.

Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, a Parsee trading partner of the Sassoons, once remarked that the “chief cause of David Sassoon’s success was the use he made of his sons.”⁸⁶ David Sassoon had eight sons in total, two from his first wife and six from his second wife. Each son took part in the family business in one way or another, some with more aptitude than others. For the David Sassoon & Co. firm, the sons were the pillars of the network of trust only strengthened by ties of

⁸⁵ Correspondence between Rachel Sassoon and her mother, Hannah Moses in 1871. 4°1790, box 8b. 1 (5932), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

⁸⁶ Jackson, *The Sassoons*, 31.

kinship. Before the Suez Canal, the family wrote hundreds of letters from Bombay to Shanghai, Shanghai to London, and London to Yokohama. However, by 1869, “the speediest means of transmitting market prices and other information was by telegraph to the Suez at £3 5s.”⁸⁷ At this point, the Sassoons utilized the telegraph for business but continued using letter-writing for their social communications. Many Jewish firms considered family members to be the ideal business partners due to the trusted nature of kinship and the security of marriage contracts made for their offspring, which could establish and consolidate branches of their businesses far and wide.

Outside of the business of marriage as a networking strategy, the women of the family also played an vital business role through their extensive correspondence, which continuously created and maintained the affective ties of family and kinship. During the Spring of 1883, Virginia Goldsmid wrote to Mrs. Sassoon (most likely Albert’s wife due to the shared political connection) that “the weather’s dull but mild [in London]. Of course, one must forget the beautiful Indian sun, and get accustomed to do without it.”⁸⁸ Talking about the weather appears quite often throughout the social and familial correspondence of the Sassoon women, as a reflection of both their adherence to the mores of polite society and the impact of the overcast northern climate on their daily routines. When a large portion of the family immigrated to England, mostly to London and Brighton, they left behind a tropical climate for a temperate one. Discomfort with this change in weather plays out in their letters through polite conversation and affective ties of nostalgia for Bombay. The conversations about weather show how the women of the family actively forged and maintained family connections in the diaspora through mundane correspondence. Kate Ezekiel, writing to Flora Sassoon, expresses a similar sentiment. “I do not

⁸⁷ Ibid. 39.

⁸⁸ Correspondence between Virginia Goldsmid and Mrs. Sassoon (most likely Sir Albert’s wife, Hannah Moses) in 1883. 4°1790, box 8b. 1 (6914), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

like [London] after sunny Bombay. It is so gloomy and cold. All yesterday it poured rain.”⁸⁹ On the surface, conversations like these may seem superficial, but they do kinship work, labor most often practiced by women and often ignored by history.

In 1869 Mozelle Sassoon (later Ezra) wrote to one of her uncles about his sister Mozelle (different than the one mentioned prior) “progressing well in all her studies,” particularly French, and that her writing “would be considered good for any English lady.”⁹⁰ This comment shows how the women monitored the family’s status as they transitioned into European culture. The letter writing of women in the Sassoon family becomes even more important in understanding the lives of nineteenth-century Jewish women and their varied economic roles. Their social correspondence shows the inner mechanisms of family kinship and how they navigated family migration and dispersal. Micaela di Leonardo, a scholar of gender studies, writes that “kin work [is] the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross-household kin ties, including visits, letters, telephone calls, presents, and cards to kin; the organization of holiday gatherings; the creation and maintenance of quasi-kin relations.”⁹¹ The decisions made by women during this labor can neglect or intensify kinship ties. Kate Sassoon wrote to her brother Solomon from Bombay to England in 1887, “I cannot but regret to learn that you expect a letter from me per every mail though you do not favor me with one regularly...Please to send me a seal engraved with my name in English for my use.”⁹² In families like the Sassoons, which were spread across

⁸⁹ Correspondence between Kate Ezekiel and Flora Sassoon (date unknown). 4°1790, box 8b. 2 (3008), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

⁹⁰ Correspondence of Mozelle Ezra to one of her Uncles (likely Elias or Albert) in 1869. 4°1790, box 8b. 1 (6159), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

⁹¹ Micaela Di Leonardo, “The Female World of Cards and Holidays: Women, Families, and the Work of Kinship,” *Signs* 12, no. 3 (1987): 442.

⁹² K.D. Sassoon to Solomon Sassoon in 1887. 4°1790, box 8b. 1 (6007), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

great geographical distance, this labor done by women in the family strengthened their networks of trust and afforded the long-term family cohesion.

To increase social connections and wealth were the primary functions of marriage in the upper classes of nineteenth-century Europe. Jewish families, like the Sassoons, followed similar aspirations albeit often “their closest friends and, more importantly, their marriage partners came from families similar to their own” rather than the Anglo-Christian elite.⁹³ Matriarchs in the family played the role of matchmakers to the younger generations where again the work of kinship came into play; however, men often played the deciding roles. Writing from England in the fall of 1892, Arthur Sassoon remarks to his nephew, Edward Sassoon, about two instances of marriage-mindedness within the family. “Reuben can’t expect a brilliant match for Mozelle, who is charming and is clever but not pretty, she is no longer young...”, and “young Raphael... seems a very nice man good looking young man of 24 and was particularly attentive to Flora. I hope he will propose in time.”⁹⁴ In Victorian society, “men possessed the capacity for reason, action, aggression, independence, and self-interest [thus belonging to the public sphere]. Women inhabited a separate, private sphere, one suitable for the so-called inherent qualities of femininity”; these qualities were destined for only one beneficial duty to society, marriage, and reproduction.⁹⁵ Mozelle, being neither pretty nor young, seemed doomed to disappoint her male relatives. This sentiment often defined women in the nineteenth century as they were confined to the domestic sphere. Flora, on the other hand, having elicited the interest of a young Baghdadi

⁹³ Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 240.

⁹⁴ Correspondence between Arthur Sassoon and Edward Sassoon 1892. 4°1790, box 8b. 1 (7011), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem. Note: Flora married that same Raphael and Mozelle married J. Hyeem.

⁹⁵ Susan Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain 1860-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 30.

Jewish man whose family had long trade connections with the Sassoons, would have been destined for success. Their sentiments reflect Victorian cultural conventions, as much of the family either lived in England or visited often by the 1890s.

Men did not escape the marriage market either. In 1858 Ezekiel Gubbay, a longtime agent for the Sassoon family dating back to their time in Baghdad, wrote to Solomon Sassoon encouraging him to think of marriage and to change his “state of single blessedness to that of married life” as well as wishing him a happy Rosh Hashanah.⁹⁶ At the time, Solomon was only seventeen, and the woman he married was not born until 1859. Marriage united specific circles of families and their financial bonds, strengthening networks of trust at the culture-economy nexus. Mr. Gubbay, mentioning Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), alludes to both the legal and cultural restrictions on interfaith marriages in the Jewish community. Solomon Sassoon was expected by his family, the Baghdadi Jewish community, and even the greater non-Jewish community to marry a Jewish woman. David Sassoon married his sons and daughters to distinguished Baghdadi Jewish families that had left Baghdad at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These marriages reflected the Sassoons’ trading partners like the Gubbays, Ezras, Ezeikiels, Hyeems, Raphaels, and Isaacs within the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora. When the family moved to Europe, they married into the Rothschilds and Gunzbourgs, wealthy Ashkenazi European Jewish families, reflecting a shift in their business partners as well as social community, which will be further explored in chapter three.

Solomon Sassoon married Mr. Gubbay’s daughter, Flora, in 1876. On the Bund, a waterfront area in Shanghai, a brass plate was laid at David Sassoon & Co’s Chinese headquarters bearing the inscription: “Foundation Stone Laid 11th Ab 5633 Jewish Era 4 August

⁹⁶ Letter of correspondence from Ezekiel Gubbay to Solomon Sassoon in 1858. 4°1790, box 7 (1652), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.



Flora Sassoon in Court dress. London 1907.

1873 Christian Era by Miss Flora Gubbay, 37th year of Queen Victoria 11th year of Tung Che...”⁹⁷ The Jewish year, in being mentioned first, reflects the firm’s respect for their Jewish heritage while the following dates reflect the wider society. Flora Sassoon, on December 29th, 1894, wrote: “I have the pleasure in accepting a Directorship of your Company and also the Presidentship of the Directors,” offering to take the place of her late husband, Solomon Sassoon, as her eldest son came of age.⁹⁸ On January 1st, 1895, Flora was instated as a full partner of David Sassoon & Co, having proved herself to Sir Albert Sassoon who

supported her appointment to the board.⁹⁹

The family never forgot their roots in India or the Middle East. They remained in constant contact with the family branches of Bombay and Shanghai through travel, letter-writing, and later telegrams. Several members of the family could still write in Judeo-Arabic well into the twentieth century, long after the staunch patriarch and last member of the immediate family to live in Iraq, David Sassoon, had passed.¹⁰⁰ The Sassoon family, as Baghdadi Jews, navigated many different arenas as they expanded their trading dynasty throughout the British Empire during the nineteenth century. With their trusted networks of kin and friends, in conjunction with

⁹⁷ Steve Hochstadt, “Jews and Shanghai Remember,” *The Scribe: Journal of Babylonian Jewry* (Israel), 62nd ed., (September 1994): 9.

⁹⁸ Letter from Flora Sassoon to David Sassoon & Co. in London in 1894. 4°1790, box 7. (1507), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

⁹⁹ Unknown British newspaper clipping announcing Flora Sassoon as partner in 1895. 4°1790, box 6b. (1652), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹⁰⁰ Family correspondence throughout the archives reflects this. 4°1790, box 66b., DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

their language skills, they negotiated the intersections of ethnicity, religion, and empire. Along each step of the way, the family relationships played a significant role in their socio-economic ascent and communal development. When the patriarch of the family, David Sassoon, passed away in 1864 he left a lasting and poignant reminder of this to the family in his will: “entertain brotherly affection and regard for each other and on no account to allow any quarrel or dissension to arise amongst them, but to live in peace and harmony with each other so that they may enjoy together the bountiful wealth which the Almighty God has bestowed upon us.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Will of David Sassoon, January 1862. 4°1790, box 7. (1860, pg. 7), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

III. Friends to the Prince of Wales: Integration into the British Empire

From the role of culture in shaping the Sassoon's economic behavior and the role of the economy in shaping Baghdadi Jewish culture, this chapter focuses on the Sassoons' strategies of presentation and integration within the British Empire. It Explores how the Sassoons functioned vis-à-vis the British Imperial elite and vis-à-vis other Jews in England and thus uncovers how the family navigated their insider/outsider status. Their strategies of integration followed navigations of the racial, religious, and ethnic hierarchies of the British Empire during the nineteenth century. From intra-Jewish relations in London to their relations with native groups in India, the Sassoons continued to navigate different racial and social hierarchies. Within imperial Britain, the Sassoons capitalized on their exotic "other" status to integrate politically and culturally into the wealthy English class.

Bombay

In their early years in Bombay, the Sassoons navigated otherness outside of their insular Baghdadi Jewish community. Bene Israel Jews, who were considered "Native Caste," had arrived in Bombay in the late eighteenth century, though some scholars argue for an earlier date. By the 1830s, over 6000 Bene Israel Jews lived in India.¹⁰² Jews under British rule in India did not face the same racial discriminatory policies that native Indians faced. Haeem Samuel Kehimkar, a Bene Israel Jew and historian in India during the nineteenth century, pushed back against those who questioned the accuracy of the group's Jewish heritage. He worked to portray the Bene Israel as non-native to India, going so far as to separate the community into two groups,

¹⁰² Shalva Weil, "The Bene Israel of India," The Museum of the Jewish People at Beit Hatfutsot, accessed March 03, 2019, <https://www.bh.org.il/>.

gora (white) and kala (black).¹⁰³ Only those he deemed gora were considered purely Jewish, in essence, not tainted by intermarriage with native Indians. When the Baghdadi Jewish community arrived in Bombay, they had been welcomed by the Bene Israel, who had recently been re-educated on halachic (Rabbinic Jewish) law by later Jewish immigrants. Yet, by the latter half of the nineteenth century community ties along shared religious values became strained as differences in culture and religious practice became apparent.

Jews from the Middle East, who communicated through Judeo-Arabic, chafed when put in contact with the Bene Israel Jew. They benefited in the Imperial system from their closer association with “whiteness” over many native Indians. They formed a coalition and called themselves “Jewish Merchants of Arabia, Inhabitant and Residents of Bombay.” By aligning their status with “Arabia” or the Middle East, trading firms like the Sassoons’ removed themselves from native Indians and instead emphasized their foreignness and exoticized their trade connections. The Bene Israel Jews’ acculturation to native India threatened this image even if the Bene Israel also tried to distance themselves from native peoples. In 1836, only four years after his flight from Iraq, David Sassoon and eight other leading Middle Eastern Jews requested that a partition-wall be erected to divide the burial grounds of the two Jewish groups. They explained to the government of Bombay:

Two components and distinct tribes of Jews inhabit this country, one having adopted the customs of the natives of India and the other faithful to their Arabian fathers, which is that of the petitioners... For a long while in a state of painful excitement against each other, occasioned by the place of their sepulcher where they... bury their departed friends and relatives... improperly and indiscriminately reserved.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Yulia Egorova, *Jews and Muslims in South Asia: Reflections on Difference, Religion, and Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 36–40.

¹⁰⁴ General Public Department, Bombay, October 9, 1836. The petition was signed in English and in Hebrew by Haskel Abdul Nubee, Murad Gubbai, Aaron Murab, Aaron Candil, David Sassoon, Mussa Azran, Isaac Dawud, Elijah Hayem, Elijah Moshe, and Nasub Solomon from Walter J. Fischel found in the “Bombay in Jewish History in the Light of New Documents from the Indian Archives.” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 38/39 (1970): 137.

David Sassoon expresses Baghdadi Jewish pride and also cultural chauvinism towards all things native, Jews included.

Historian Joan Roland, an expert in the field studying who studies Jews in India, wrote for a Jewish media organization that “Racial separation between Indians and British, which was fostered by the colonial pattern, also affected the attitudes of the paler Baghdadis towards

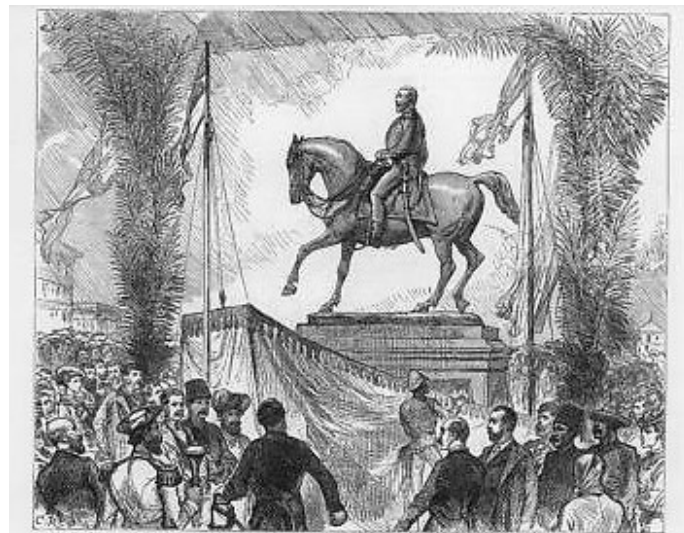


Illustration in Vanity Fair of the Prince of Wales, 1879.

indigenous Indians. The Baghdadis wished to assimilate into British society and to be considered European, both socially and politically.”¹⁰⁵ In 1866, the Crown honored Albert Sassoon as a Companion of the Order of the Star of India. To celebrate, Albert Sassoon hosted a lavish supper and ball at Sans

Souci, the Sassoon mansion in Byculla. The

Bombay Gazette, a British owned newspaper, reported that “no ‘natives’ were among the three hundred guests” and noted the family’s “evident wish to ally themselves with English society in Bombay.”¹⁰⁶ In India, the Sassoons continued to ally themselves with Britain through acts of strategic patriotism to navigate the racial hierarchy of the British versus the native population in India. After Prince Consort Albert died in 1861, Albert Sassoon put £3000 toward erecting a statue in his honor in Bombay. *Vanity Fair* wrote of the event: “he [Albert Sassoon] has ever become more and more grateful to the Government which protected him in the enjoyment of his

¹⁰⁵ Joan G. Roland, “The Baghdadi Jews of India,” My Jewish Learning, July 27, 2010, accessed March 02, 2019, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-jews-of-india/>.

¹⁰⁶ Jackson, *The Sassoons*, 47.

possessions. He has endowed untold charities, has provided hospitals and almshouses with princely magnificence and has recently erected in Bombay an equestrian statue of the Prince of Wales.”¹⁰⁷

Only twenty years after his arrival to Bombay on September 28th, 1853, David Sassoon swore allegiance to the British Empire. “I David Sassoon of Bombay Jewish Merchant do swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to the Sovereign of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of these Territories as dependent thereon and that I will be true and faithful to the East India Company.”¹⁰⁸ Just a few years later the Jews in Delhi followed suit. I.A. Sassoon, to his uncle Solomon Sassoon, wrote in June of 1857, “I have a very good intelligence to inform you of the recapture of Delhi by the British from the insurgents... You must read all the... Memorial” which the Jews addressed the Governor in regard to their loyalty and offering their services if required.”¹⁰⁹ That same year, David Sassoon pledged a legion of Baghdadi Jews to assist the British army in their cause.¹¹⁰

Sir Bartle Frere, Governor of Bombay, often commented on the utility of ethnic minority trading communities. In 1862, he remarked that the Baghdadi Jews were “like the Parsees, a most valuable link between us and the natives.”¹¹¹ The Sassoons and other minority groups that were recipients of the British Empire’s goodwill in India were heavily invested in its success. At the time, a European merchant, W.G. Gulland, noted that “for the opium trade, pure and simple, in itself, I care nothing; it is wholly in the hands of Jews and Armenians.”¹¹² The British empire

¹⁰⁷ *Vanity fair*, August 2, 1879.

¹⁰⁸ David Sassoon swearing allegiance to the United Kingdom in 1853. 4°1790, box 8b 2. (7361), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹⁰⁹ Letter from I.A. Sassoon to his uncle Solomon Sassoon 1857. 4°1790, box 7. (1532), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹¹⁰ Mendelsohn, “Not the Retiring Kind,” 88-90.

¹¹¹ Roland, *Jews in British India*, 22-23.

¹¹² W.G. Gulland quoted in Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy*, 117.

relied on the funds from the opium trade to fund its colonial conquests, and the colonial administration maintained a mercantile elite in Asia, with which the Sassoons were aligned. The relationship between the empire and its mercantile class relied upon a certain co-dependence in their aligned interests.

The Times of India, an English-run newspaper, reported on David Sassoon's death in 1864, naming him "The Friend of China," and reporting that "Bombay has lost one of its most energetic, wealthy, public-spirited and benevolent citizens ... in energy and perseverance he was as much more conspicuous than others as in his Saul-like stature."¹¹³ The dichotomous image of David Sassoon, as Europeans viewed him, is exemplified in this obituary. On the one hand, he is remembered by his wealth and philanthropic contributions, yet, on the other hand, remembered as other by depicting him as a "Friend of China" and aligning him with Saul (the first King of Ancient Israel and Judah). The David Sassoon & Co. firm in Bombay served a distinct due to the British Empire due to its success in the Indian cotton and opium markets. Reciprocally, the structure of the informal empire allowed the Sassoons to continue to practice their cultural and religious values in unique multiethnic trading centers that flourished within this system.

This chapter as a whole is about strategies of integration within a constantly shifting landscape of imperial belonging and othering. The Sassoons arrival to English was not one of immediate and unproblematic integration. In Bombay, they had worked hard to emphasize their foreign Baghdadi Jewish identity to be imperial insiders in a British colony, where the natives were marginalized. In England, while they were accepted into the English upper class due to economic and political ties, they still encountered racial and religious othering.

England

¹¹³ *The Times of India*, January 10, 1865.

Jews were expelled from England in 1290 by King Edward I and would not be allowed to return until 1657 under Oliver Cromwell. In part, this readmittance came on the success of cities like Amsterdam in utilizing the diasporic trading networks of their Jewish communities in their exploration of global commerce. In 1753, a naturalization act for Jews in England passed but was repealed shortly after in 1754 due to public outcry. Even so, this act harkened a new future for Jews in England, whose population totaled 60,000 by the 1880s, representing less than a percent of the total population. The freedoms in England attracted a wealthy set of Jews in the Victorian period, and they constituted 12 percent of non-landed millionaires who died in 1890, a group which rose to 23 percent by 1910.¹¹⁴ By the 1920s, this number would never be higher than 9 percent. Jews were a minority of the English wealthy but overrepresented concerning their small presence within England as a whole.

Sassoon David Sassoon traveled to establish a headquarters for the David Sassoon & Co. firm in London in 1858. Around the same time, Jews were emancipated in England, and Lionel de Rothschild sat in the British House of Commons due to changes in British law. In England, the Sassoons again found themselves as outsiders in a new society almost five thousand miles away from India where much of their family remained. However, their business success insulated them from the experiences of others with new money and other Jewish communities. For nineteenth-century high society, “the life of finance could be reconciled to the ideals of landed society in a way that the life of manufacture, with its grimy factories and unwashed workers, could not.”¹¹⁵ The Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) included many of these

¹¹⁴ William D. Rubinstein, “Jews among Top British Wealth Holders, 1857– 1969: Decline of the Golden Age,” *Jewish Social Studies* 34 (1972): 77.

¹¹⁵ William D. Rubinstein, *Men of Property: The Very Wealthy in Britain since the Industrial Revolution* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 136.

nouveau riche in his inner circle, including many members of the Jewish elite like the Montiefiores, Rothschilds, and the Sassoons. This patronage, while not creating acceptance within all of British society, allowed them greater access than they might have received otherwise. Throughout the family archive, there are several examples of the closeness of this royal friendship to the Sassoons, particularly Sir Albert Sassoon and his brother Reuben. On September 23, 1887, Francis Knollys, 1st Viscount Knollys, the private secretary to the Prince of Wales from 1870 to 1910, wrote Sir Albert: “The Prince of Wales desires me to say that he will be very glad if you will come to Scotland in the train by which travels on Sunday next...it will give him great pleasure to give you dinner.”¹¹⁶ The friendship of the Prince of Wales continued for the Sassoon family until his death in 1910, by which time the Sassoons had integrated into

elite British society.

When Reuben Sassoon received his own *Vanity Fair* caricature by Spy in September of 1890, he was described as follows: “He is a friend of the Prince of Wales, but in the 1890 season he has not been with him at Homburg and having no enemies he was popular in Society. He is full of charity, but he is quite an unostentatious man. He entertained the Shah.”¹¹⁷ This short description summarizes what British society deemed to be particularly important about the Sassoon family—their relationship with the Prince of Wales. However, even in



“Mr. Reuben Sassoon.” Reuben David Sassoon.
Spy. From *Vanity Fair* September 20, 1890.

¹¹⁶ Letter to Sir Albert from the Prince of Wales in 1887. 4°1790, box 6b. (444), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹¹⁷ *Vanity Fair*, September 20, 1890.

high society, the Sassoons and other Jews of their set were not liked nor accepted by all, even with the Prince of Wales's patronage. The Duchess Buccleuch, a lifelong friend of Queen Victoria, once mentioned that she only once "entertain[ed] a Jew, whom she did not know, as a specially marked compliment to the Prince of Wales."¹¹⁸ Many in high society agreed with the Duchess of Buccleuch's assessment of the Jews within the Prince of Wales' circle, only tolerating them for the sake of propriety and out of deference.

On the other side of the spectrum from the elite Jews in Britain were the immigrant Jews who had taken up residence in Whitechapel in the East End. A Christian social worker, working in Whitechapel in the 1880s, noted, "the English visitor feels himself one of a subject race in the presence of dominant and overwhelming invaders," referring to Jewish immigrants.¹¹⁹ This fear somewhat reflected the popularity of the invader novel during this period that pitted Britain against an inescapable horde, most often the Germans but also scapegoated to Jews.¹²⁰ Similar fears were reflected with the "Jewish Question" as Europeans dealt with the appropriate legal and civil status of Jews in their countries. After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in Russia in 1881, thousands of Eastern European Jews fled pogroms and economic impoverishment for other places in Europe and the Americas. Most of these immigrants to England arrived in Whitechapel, where a shared language, Yiddish, and Jewish charities helped them acculturate. One report in 1884 declared that Whitechapel "has never thoroughly recovered from the

¹¹⁸ John Vincent, ed., *The Crawford Papers: The Journals of David Lindsay, Twenty-Seventh Earl of Crawford and Tenth Earl of Balcarres, 1871–1940, during the Years 1892–1940* (Manchester: 1984), 268.

¹¹⁹ Royal Commission on Alien Immigration, 1903, II, Minutes of Evidence, Cd. 1742, quoted in Gainer, *The Alien Invasion*, 42; *East London Observer*, 18 January 1902; Henry Walker, *East London: Sketches of Christian Work and Workers* (London: 1896), 17.

¹²⁰ Tom Reiss, "Imagining the Worst: How a Literary Genre Anticipated the Modern World," *The New Yorker*: 106–114, November 28, 2005.

overcrowding that arose when, night after night, wagon-loads of poor Jews were brought up from the docks, where they had just arrived, still panic-stricken, from Russia.”¹²¹

Just as the Sassoons had given money to poor Baghdadi Jewish communities in Bombay, they did the same in Whitechapel. In 1871, Jewish charities worked to establish a Jewish workhouse in the area. The Sassoons’ contribution to the workhouse, which was publicized in the *Jewish Chronicle*, was the largest.¹²² In 1915, Flora Sassoon, with the help of the Rothschild family, laid the foundation stone for the London Jewish Hospital after little support from the community or government. Many Jews from Eastern Europe were wary of non-Jewish hospitals and had been without proper care for decades. A correspondent for the *Jewish Chronicle* wrote in 1914, “I should like to know why synagogues which are nearly empty for 300 days in the year, may be erected by the dozen, but Jewish hospitals, for which there is the most urgent daily need, must not be thought of; why all the philanthropic and social institutions ... may be under our name and supervision, but why just the support of a Jewish hospital might disseminate anti-Semitism.”¹²³ Many of the elite Jewish families in England felt some responsibility for this poor Jewish community as much as they also did not wish to be associated with them. The acculturated image that the Anglicized Jews had built over a century seemed at risk because of the Eastern European Jews, whose extreme poverty often led to crime and prostitution; integrated middle and upper-class Jews feared that the emigres’ poverty, combined with bourgeois fears and perceptions of the working classes, could easily turn British society against all Jews.¹²⁴ The

¹²¹ Report of the Lancet Special Sanitary Commission on the Polish Colony of Jew Tailors, *The Lancet*, 3 (May 1884): 817-818.

¹²² *Jewish Chronicle*, 21, 28 April; 5, 12 May 1871.

¹²³ *Ibid.* June 12, 1914.

¹²⁴ Seth Koven, “The Jewish Question and the Social Question in Late Victorian London: The Fictions and Investigative Journalism of Margaret Harkness,” in I.M. van den Broek, C.A.L. Smit and D.J. Wolfram (eds), *Imagination and commitment. Representations of the social question* (Groningen Studies in Cultural Change Leuven: Peeters 2010), 37-58.

Sassoon family, being outsiders to these Anglicized Jews, often contributed to the Jews of Whitechapel and even stood in as community representatives.

Away from London, the Sassoons interacted with different Jewish communities. The *Lady's Realm: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine* reported in 1870 that “A wag once described modern Brighton as a ‘town with a Sassoon at each end of it and one in the middle.’ The Sassoons, however, abound more numerous than the joke implies; there are at least eight branches of the family now resident in Brighton... They are of Hindoo extraction, extremely wealthy and... of alien faith.”¹²⁵ This statement of their ubiquity is chock-full of envy, anxiety, and disdain. When the Sassoons were not in London, they lived in Brighton, which already had a long history within the Jewish community in England. European Jews had arrived in Brighton as early as the 1780s. The Middle Street Synagogue, built in 1875, was partially funded by the Sassoon family who became prominent community leaders in the area. In 1892 it became the first synagogue with electricity in England, a project led by the Sassoon family.¹²⁶ Their house was located at Eastern Terrace, where they hosted the Prince of Wales twice. They built the family mausoleum as an addition to their home in 1892.

¹²⁵ “Brighton Society,” *Lady's Realm: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine* vol. 1, (1897), 197.

¹²⁶ Timothy Carder, *The Encyclopedia of Brighton*, (Lewes: East Sussex County Libraries, 1990), 115.



*Louise Sassoon golfing at Ashley Park
circa 1890*

In September of 1870, Albert Sassoon received a letter stating, “A friend of Princess Murat and of her daughter, the Duchess de Mauchy (who are both relatives of the Emperor of the French) ...having been driven from Paris by the Revolution... [had considered] Ashley Park so peculiarly well-adapted for the temporary residence of the Empress.” Ashley Park, in the private residential neighborhood Walton-on-Thames in Surrey, was bought by Sassoon

David Sassoon in 1867 and remained with the family until it was demolished in 1920. By 1890, the house functioned as a favorite golf club where the Sassoons hosted their friends.

For several decades the Sassoons’ identities in the East were conflated with Parsee or Indian traders in both business newspapers and society pages that filtered back into Europe. Sir Bartle Frere, the Governor of Bombay in the 1860s, explained that both Baghdadi Jews and Parsees were “oriental in origin and appreciation” and at the same time “English in their objects and associations.”¹²⁷ Towards the last half of the nineteenth century, the family continued to move into ever more European circles of influence that they navigated within a framework of difference. The religious and racial structures of the British Empire led to the family’s integration, acculturation as they left behind their Baghdadi Jewish roots and the familiarity of their long-trusted inner circles. Their diasporic Jewish networks extended to elite Ashkenazi Jewish circles as they navigated inter-Jewish politics in England. As Europeans learned more about the East, they became attracted to the allure of the foreign, which the Sassoons

¹²⁷ Roland, *Jews in British India*, 17.

encapsulated as “oriental” Jews, through their performance of identity that leaned into strategies of stereotypical expectations.

As merchants like the Sassoons enmeshed themselves in imperial trade and the informal British empire, they remained “other” both by choice and by definition, at least until WWI. Scholar Allison Mountz writes “As a verb, other means to distinguish, label, categorize, name, identify, place and exclude those who do not fit a societal norm. ... ‘Othering’ is the process that makes the other.”¹²⁸ Throughout England, “in speeches, sermons, and debates, Judaism was disparaged, and Jews portrayed as aliens and outsiders, sharpers and cheats, the traditional blaspheming enemies of Christianity.”¹²⁹ Jews, who had been previously Anglicized, came across these sentiments worried that newer Jewish immigrants could affect the community’s public image. The Sassoons, as Baghdadi Jews, had to face both inner- and outer-community policing of identity as they were othered by British imperial and British Jewish society.

The othering of Jews in England reflected both long-held European Christian Judeophobia and modern anti-Semitism that classified Jews as superstitious, backwards, and even amoral. By the nineteenth century, non-European Jews, often from the Ottoman Empire, were othered by Westerners’ fascination with the East, especially as trade opened in China and India. Orientalism, as a historical theory, sits within the scope of “othering” as Europeans used the East to identify the collective “us” (Europeans) versus “them” (often people of Asia). Since Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism*, scholars have begun to broaden the power dynamics to look at “self-Orientalism,” “auto-Orientalism” or “internalized-Orientalism,” which could all be

¹²⁸ Allison Mountz, *The Other. In Key concepts in political geography* (Los Angeles: SAGE), 328.

¹²⁹ Todd M Endelman, “Communal Solidarity among the Jewish Elite of Victorian London,” *Victorian Studies* 28, no. 3 (1985), 518.

forms of double-consciousness.¹³⁰ The theories pose questions about the strategic uses of self-orientalism practiced by individuals seeking political or financial profit within systems of Empire and colonialism. Historian Julia Phillips Cohen writes that this scholarship explores the “process of self-exoticization as a calculated response to the expectations of European and American spectators and focuses on the ways that various so-called Orientals have managed to serve their own interests by performing the stereotyped roles assigned to them by others.”¹³¹ However, Cohen also emphasizes the need for caution in this scholarship so that it “challenges the assumption that commodified and essentialized forms of self-presentation are universally perceived as demeaning.”¹³² Jewish merchants with Ottoman origins like the Sassoons negotiated both market demands and cultural concerns together. Their collective self-fashioning, whether to exoticize or to integrate, helped them navigate the racial hierarchies of the British Empire.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the exoticism of the Orient fascinated Europeans as they encountered Asia and the Middle East during their imperial conquests. Europeans often exoticized and Orientalized the Sassoon family well into the twentieth century after most of the family had been raised in England and Anglicized. Their sons were schooled at Cambridge, they had mansions in the most fashionable districts, and several members of the family had married into well-to-do British families like the Thornycrofts, vehicle manufacturers, or the Beers, wealthy financiers. This orientalism that surrounded the Sassoon family from their time in India only strengthened their appeal to wealthy British circles that were curious about the exotic East.

¹³⁰ For self-Orientalism, see among others Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing against Culture,” in Richard G. Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, N.Mex., 1991), 137–162; William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham, N.C., 2003); and Saadia Toor, “Indo-Chic: The Cultural Politics of Consumption in Post-Liberalization India,” *SOAS Literary Review* 2 (July 2000): 1–33.

¹³¹ Julia Phillips Cohen, “Oriental by Design: Ottoman Jews, Imperial Style, and the Performance of Heritage,” *The American Historical Review* 119, no. 2 (2014): 370.

¹³² *Ibid.* 371.

The family, to some extent, accepted this evaluation or, rather, had little means to stop it as they were often classified as India, Parsee, or Merchant Princes by the press of the time. They could sometimes even use the classification to their advantage when presenting their expertise in commerce and trade in India and China. To outsiders who viewed them through an Orientalist lens, their otherness meant profit in Far East markets or at the very least an interesting oddity.

Postcolonial scholars look to Western attitudes regarding the East to uncover the subtler power structures of colonialism. Literary scholar Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism*, wrote, “The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies, and colonial styles.”¹³³ However, Said misses the dynamic of orientalism vis-à-vis the Jewish community by focusing mainly on Muslim communities in the Middle East as well as missing the power structures that exist beyond that of the metropole. To Said, Orientalism is a construction of the “oriental” as an inferior to the Occident in order to “dominate it, restructure it, and have authority.” This misses the ways in which Jews and other groups dealt with Orientalism and even strategically used their exotic status as a way of westernizing themselves.¹³⁴ In addition, it misses how European Jews Orientalized other Jewish groups, specifically Jews like the Sassoons who had ties to the Middle East and India. Jews do not fit the neat binary of colonizer versus colonized that frames postcolonial scholarship. Jews were both simultaneously—an othered group that faced discrimination yet a non-native group that often gained socio-economic and political opportunity through the empire.

¹³³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Edward W. Said* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 1-2.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* 3.

The English fascination with the Orient spilled over into the favors that the elite in England often asked of the Sassoons. Arthur Bernard, an agent for David Sassoon & Co., wrote to Solomon Sassoon from Yokohama in February of 1870. “I have lately come upon three pieces of really old, and beautiful, Japanese gold lacquer, formerly belonging to the Prince of Sendai... I really thought [Mr. Albert Sassoon] ought to have these, which are a kind of thing rapidly disappearing from Japan.”¹³⁵ This example speaks to the high status assigned to east Asian treasures in elite British culture (including wealthy Jews). Correspondingly, the British elite had an interest in the Sassoons’ trade in the Far East and exoticized the family. Throughout David Sassoon’s sons’ travels in China and Japan, like their European counterparts, they picked up exotic curios to both keep and trade for favors themselves. Anna E Elderton, whose husband was a General in India, wrote to one of the Sassoons from India (circa 1875), “I am tempted to ask you a favor. Is it in your power to obtain for me a handsome thoroughbred Chinese dog?... I shall be very much indebted to you if you will kindly send me one, and at the same time let my husband know the amount of our debt to you for the dog?”¹³⁶ Mrs. Elderton’s letter reflects the British fascination with the Orient. Sourcing artifacts from Asia reflected wealth and status in Europe as they were expensive to procure and ship. The Sassoons, who had experience in this type of trade from their time in Baghdad, were particularly well suited to furnishing these requests. In turn, by fulfilling these requests, they did not just make money but also gained connections with the British elite who often controlled their access to trade within the empire.

¹³⁵ Letter from Yokohama, Japan, Arthur Bernard to Solomon Sassoon (in China) 1870. 4°1790, box 8b 1. (6011), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹³⁶ Anna E. Elderton to Mr. Sassoon circa 1870. 4°1790, box 8b 1. (7074), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

Several letters reflect Solomon Sassoon's growing friendship with Lord Napier, who acted as the Governor of Madras in 1866 to 1872 and later as the Viceroy of India in 1872. Lord Napier's wife wrote to Solomon from the Government House in Madras in October of 1870, "Please accept Lord Napier's and my best thanks for your beautiful present of China which we both greatly admire as the very best specimen of modern Chinese Work..."¹³⁷ These extravagant "gifts" signified the Sassoons' navigation of networks of trade alongside networks of patronage and cultural capital within the British empire. Lord Napier's access to the British Empire's inner workings in India was invaluable to the Sassoons' business ventures. The formation of these governmental and imperial ties can also be seen in a letter to Albert Sassoon, from Mr. Seymour Fitzgerald, the Governor of Bombay, in August of 1870 and parallels Lord Napier's letter. "The Japanese vase...is indeed a most beautiful work of art and I should hesitate to deprive you of it, except that you wish me to accept it as a mark of your friendship."¹³⁸ The same can be seen reflected in a letter written to the Duke of Sutherland in November of 1875 from Reuben Sassoon, writing from Sans Souci, the family mansion in India, "I send per bearer 2 parcels of Manilla cheroots, one for His Royal Highness and the other for your Grace..."¹³⁹ The friendship the Sassoons established with the Prince of Wales, while in England and abroad, served them greatly when they moved their headquarters to Leaden Hall in London.

Albert Sassoon followed David Sassoon to England in the 1870s after the Lord Mayor of London, Sir Sydney Waterlow, at a Court of Common Council in July of 1873

¹³⁷ From Lady Napier to Solomon Sassoon 1870. 4°1790, box 8b 1. (6916), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹³⁸ To Albert Sassoon from Mr. Seymour Fitzgerald, governor of Bombay, 1870. 4°1790, box 8b 1. (7082), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹³⁹ From Sans Souci to England Nov 24 1875 to the Duke of Sutherland. 4°1790, box 8b 1. (7039), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

presented him with “the Freedom of this City... in consideration of his munificent and philanthropic exertions in the cause of charity and education, especially in our Indian empire.”¹⁴⁰

When presented this award, the Chamberlain, Benjamin Scott Esq., addressed Sassoon:

Our Indian possessions are now producing a race of merchant princes cultivating the art of peace and prosecuting their fortunes under the protecting aegis of the beloved Sovereign of this realm... the first native subject of Her Majesty’s Indian Empire whom Freedom has conferred... I allude to your being of the Hebrew persuasion... the body whom I represent on this occasion... had it in mind to renew the expression of their opinion that the nature of a man’s conviction as it regards the worship of his Maker should not present a bar to the possession of equal rights with other worthy subjects.¹⁴¹

This speech represents many facets of the British imperial system of who could be allowed to escape their status as proxies of the empire to become citizens. Jewish difference, in this speech, is constructed differently than it is in the *Bombay Gazette* above. Here Jews are described as a native elite, but racially different from the occupying British as a “race of merchant princes” as well as well as different due to being of the “Hebrew persuasion.” Economic utility is the solvent that allows native/Hebrew to be granted equal rights. Having enriched the empire after the breakup of the monopoly of the East India Trading Company with the Charter Act of 1813 and working under its protection, the Sassoons could rise within European society as other Jews could not. In addition, their transition to England came after the Jewish Relief Act of 1858, on the heels of cooling tensions with Catholics and other religious minorities. These new sets of laws allowed families like the Sassoons to socially flourish in growing Jewish enclaves and even into high society. Albert Sassoon responded, perhaps sharing the newfound hope of the Jewish communities throughout Europe, that “It is an honor which, conferred upon me as a member of

¹⁴⁰ Council Library Committee for the City of London (England), *Court of Common Council. Library Committee, London’s Roll of Fame: Being Complimentary Notes and Addresses from the City of London, on Presentation of the Honorary Freedom of That City ... from 1757 to 1884* (Cassell: 1884), 294.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* 294-5.

the Hebrew community, is a new proof of the religious tolerance which is one of the characters of your enlightened Corporation.”¹⁴²

On January 31st, 1890 the *London Gazette* announced Albert Sassoon’s ascension to Baronet.¹⁴³ In England during the time, “Baronetcies were essentially the reward of back-bench politicians with ample private means and a recognized status in the House of Commons or the constituencies. But they were also given to hard-working country gentlemen, businessmen, and manufacturers with a notable record of local service.”¹⁴⁴ In this case, Sir Albert Sassoon received his title due to his family’s service to trade in the British Empire. When the Sassoons arrived in England, as members of a minority group, they secured their social acceptance by taking cues from the respectable society, which often meant the Anglican upper class. They learned to adopt clothing, entertainment, and recreational activities popular at the time. Stanley Jackson, the Sassoons’ biographer in the 1960s, met them through his biographical work with the Royal British Opera House, to which they donated money. While the Sassoons had been traditionally observant Jews in Bombay and Baghdad, they acculturated to middle-class English society where religion played a central role in class identity. “Religious observance being a necessary part of respectability, they adhered to the established conventions of the faith in which they had been raised.”¹⁴⁵ Over time, however, like many other elite Jewish families in England, the Sassoons continued to drift away from their religious and ethnic heritage as they more fully tried to integrate into high society.

Inter-Jewish Relationships

¹⁴² Ibid. 295.

¹⁴³ *The London Gazette*, January 31, 1890.

¹⁴⁴ H.J. Hanham, “The Sale of Honours in Late Victorian England,” *Victorian Studies* 3, no. 3 (1960): 278.

¹⁴⁵ Endelman, “Communal Solidarity,” 504.

Albert Sassoon set up his home in London at Albert Gate, Knightsbridge, and another residence at Brighton. He filled a leading position in fashionable society as well as Jewish society as the vice-president of the Anglo-Jewish Association. He frequently hosted the Shah of Persia and the Prince of Wales, donated vast sums to the arts, and gave his children the best education. To the society papers, the Sassoons were more often defined by their oriental exoticism rather than their Jewishness, which appeared different than that of other English Jewish families like the Rothschilds. His son Edward later inherited the Baronet title and solidified the bond with the Rothschilds by marrying Aline Caroline de Rothschild of the French branch in 1887.



John Singer Sargent, Portrait of Lady [Aline] Sassoon, 1907

Upon the announcement of the marriage, Sir Albert wrote to Aline's father, Baron Gustave de Rothschild, in September of 1887, asking him to invite the Prince of Wales. Gustave de Rothschild responded, "It certainly should be a great honor for us all having HRH in Paris, but for that sake, I could not do a thing...I cannot ask the Prince to leave England and cross the sea to be present to a family party...[it] would be considered as unbecoming."¹⁴⁶

Reflecting, perhaps, the Sassoons' lack of understanding of societal propriety, the Rothschilds often guided the family in their new lives in England. While the Prince of Wales was

¹⁴⁶ Gustave responding to Sir Albert Sassoon in 1887. 4°1790, box 6b. (446), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

unable to attend the wedding in Paris, the Shah of Persia did along with other significant guests.¹⁴⁷ The marriage between Aline de Rothschild and Edward Sassoon strategically united two elite Jewish families, just like the Baghdadi Jewish marriages throughout the Sassoons' family tree had played strategic networking roles in decades prior. Marrying into the Rothschilds proved that the Sassoons had been fully accepted into elite Jewish society in England.

In addition, it paralleled with their new business ventures that involved the Rothschild family firms in both London and Paris. Maison Laffitte Rothschild wrote to Edward Sassoon in February of 1894, "I see by the enclosed letter to our London House that you wish to have some Confidential information about the party named and I hasten to tell you in reply that your firm had better not have anything to do with that man."¹⁴⁸ Just like the Baghdadi trade diaspora had served the Sassoons in the East, Jewish trade networks and networks of trust served them in Europe as well. The Rothschilds, who were well known to have agents for their firms all over Europe, came by information sometimes faster than the British government. In terms of trade and commerce, this information was invaluable to the Sassoons who traded with volatile commodities like cotton and opium.

In 1885, Lord de Rothschild was elevated to peerage. Albert Sassoon wrote to Rothschild that it was a "Matter of rejoicing to our race who you so worthily represent!"¹⁴⁹ Within Jewish communities in England, Jews with power and privilege were expected to advocate for those in lesser positions. This expectation of mutual Jewish support can be seen in a letter Gustave de

¹⁴⁷ Letter to the Shah of Persia 1887. 4°1790, box 6b. (437), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹⁴⁸ Maison Laffitte Rothschild to Edward Sassoon in February of 1894. 4°1790, box 8a. (5021), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹⁴⁹ Letter from Albert Sassoon to Lord de Rothschild 1885. 4°1790, box 8b. 1. (7009), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

Rothschild wrote to Edward Sassoon in Brighton, in March of 1894. Rothschild wrote, it is “Wrong for a Jew to oppose Samuel Montagu, as he is such a Zealous member of our community and does so much for it” due to “Natty opposing his crusade against the House of Lords.”¹⁵⁰ Samuel Montagu, made 1st Baron of Swaythling in 1885, was a liberal politician and Jewish philanthropist. He had devoted his work in the House of Lords to advance Jewish causes. “Natty,” Nathaniel Mayer Rothschild, 1st Baron Rothschild, whose grandfather had founded N.M. Rothschilds & Sons in London in 1811, was often at odds with Montagu. The inter-community conflict was often kept within the community to show a united front to the larger English society. Wealthy members of the Jewish community in England often took leadership roles in both religious and political matters. Through these roles, they could promote Jewish causes beyond the community to the greater public.

By 1890, Albert Sassoon was elevated to the peerage. As his father was the community leader to the Baghdadi Jewish community in India, and his grandfather to the community in Baghdad, Albert became a community leader to Jews in England. H. Coke, Albert’s personal secretary and a long-time agent for David Sassoon & Co., responded to a letter from His Highness Abdul Aziz bin Saeed in 1894.¹⁵¹ The Prince had asked Sir Albert to vent his grievances to Parliament but, due to Sir Albert’s state of health at the time, he had to refuse. He passed away in late 1896 just as both famine and the bubonic plague hit Bombay and Calcutta. Flora Sassoon, who had been promoted to partner in 1895, joined the Plague Committee and invested in an anti-cholera prophylactic developed by Professor Waldemar Haffkine, a young

¹⁵⁰ Gustave de Rothschild to Edward Sassoon 1894. 4°1790, box 8b. 1. (Unknown), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹⁵¹ Letter from H. Coke to Abdul Aziz bin Saeed in 1894. 4°1790, box 7. (981), DSA, National

Jewish bacteriologist from Russia.¹⁵² The *Jewish Chronicle* noted that a “Ukraine Jew, trained in the schools of European science, saves the lives of Hindus and Mohammedans and is decorated by the descendant of William the Conqueror and Alfred the Great” when he was knighted in Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee year Honors in 1897.¹⁵³ Flora Sassoon’s support of the local communities in India reflected the family’s deep connection with the region both in business and affiliation even as they had become more British.

In 1936, Chief Rabbi Herzog described Flora Sassoon as “a living well of Torah, of piety, of wisdom, of goodness and charity, of the staunchest loyalty to tradition, and out of her wonderful well, Israel could draw in abundance noble incentives and lofty inspiration.”¹⁵⁴ While some members of the family abandoned Judaism in the twentieth century, Flora Sassoon continued to embrace the tradition. Her son, David Solomon Sassoon, collected over one thousand rare Jewish manuscripts from Baghdad to Damascus.¹⁵⁵ He worked to preserve Baghdadi Jewish identity as the climate in the region became more volatile for Jews, who had previously been included in growing Iraqi nationalism but by the 1930s were subjected to discrimination and even pogroms by the 1940s. His son, Solomon David Sassoon, continued his father’s and grandmother’s work as a rabbi and philanthropist into the late twentieth century.

Perhaps telling of their rise to prominence in British society by the end of the nineteenth century, on August 25th, 1894, Lady Aline Sassoon received a letter from an admirer Agnes Pease who wrote, “I have entered a beautiful little puppy and being the 1st Pet Show ever held in Brighton and the first time a Maltese has been shown for years, will you honour me by allowing

¹⁵² Jackson, *The Sassoons*, 109.

¹⁵³ *London Jewish Chronicle*, June 1, 2012, 8.

¹⁵⁴ *Jewish Chronicle*, January 24, 1936.

¹⁵⁵ H. Rabinowicz, “The Sassoon Treasures,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 57, no. 2 (1966): 57.

him to be called Lord Sassoon? ...Her Grace the Duchess of Roxburgh has purchased several of me.”¹⁵⁶ The Maltese’s origins, like the Sassoons’, migrated from the Middle East and became favored in Ancient Rome and Greece. It seems the Sassoons had officially entered the beau monde that stretched from London to Shanghai.

¹⁵⁶ Letter to Aline Sassoon from an admirer in 1894. arc. 4°1790, box 8a. (5477), DSA.

Epilogue: From Insiders to Quasi-Insiders?

There were instances in which the Sassoons' Jewishness and orientalness were conflated in the society pages of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Normally, Jews were seen as foreign, though not necessarily oriental. The Orientalization of the Sassoon family by the British represented another facet of their othering as Jews. In addition, there is a class distinction between the Jewish elite and those Jews (whether immigrants or members of the working class) in considering who was "in" and who was "out." There were elements of Jews' marginalization that the Sassoons were not subjected to due to their upper-class status. The arc of the Sassoon family's integration does not end in the nineteenth century, but rather their negotiations of identity and integration continue. Their navigation up to this point – from outsiders to insiders – unravels once we reach the interwar period with the same navigations and negotiations of identity that the family experienced with the first generation in the 1830s in India and later Britain in the 1850s.

During the period before the World War I, even though violence was rare toward Jews in Britain at large, both native and foreign Jews feared the worst with news of pogroms in Russia and anti-Dreyfus riots in France, in addition to isolated cases at home. Historian Todd Edelman writes that Anglicized Jews from the late nineteenth century to the start of WWI feared "being associated with alien, un-English customs, with superstition, dirt, clannishness, and crime, with cosmopolitan loyalties... They prided themselves on their acculturation and integration, their material and social accomplishments."¹⁵⁷ This caused many elite Jewish families to mute their distinctiveness as Jews and move away from religious observance.

¹⁵⁷ Edelman, *The Jews of Britain*, 165.

In August of 1891, the *Jewish Chronicle* editorialized, “As long as there is a section of Jews in England who proclaim themselves aliens by their mode of life, by their very looks, by every word they utter, so long will the entire community be an object of distrust to Englishmen.”¹⁵⁸ This editorial is assimilationist—it critiques visible and linguistic Jewish difference as endangering British Jewish integration and security. The Jewishness and proud “otherness” of the Sassoon family in this period shifted from a self-professed identity to one of ambivalent origins—due to mixed marriage and conversion for some and to antisemitism and the increased stigma of Jewishness for all. In contrast to the first and second generation’s careful and strategic negotiation of racial, ethnic, and religious difference in Bombay and England, this cohort expresses more loathing and ambivalence about their stigmatized “oriental” and Jewish roots due to an uptick in nationalism throughout Europe that aimed to create unity through ethnonationalism. In addition, this change is highlighted in the struggles of a native-born Sassoon generation who were born and bred in England and expected to be treated as full-blooded Englishmen but were othered as Jews.

Siegfried Sassoon

“BEHOLD these jewelled, merchant Ancestors, Foregathered in some chancellery of death; Calm, provident, discreet, they stroke their beards And move their faces slowly in the gloom, And barter monstrous wealth with speech subdued, Lustreless eyes and acquiescent lids.”

~ “Ancestors” by Siegfried Sassoon, 1918

¹⁵⁸ *Jewish Chronicle*, August 7, 1891.

One of the Sassoons' most illustrious relatives of the twentieth century was Siegfried Sassoon, a leading poet during World War I and a decorated soldier. His poem "Ancestors" is highlighted above and reflects his ambivalent views of the Sassoons—his paternal line—by evoking an exoticized wealth also deeply wrapped in anti-Semitic tropes of the cold-hearted, calculating, avaricious Jewish capitalist. His father Alfred, son of Sassoon David, had been disowned by the family for marrying a Christian woman, Theresa Thornycroft. Scholar Peter Lawson explains that in, "[Siegfried's] First World War poetry ... he deployed traces of contemporary Jewish discourses - Old Testament



Siegfried Sassoon (May 1915) by George Charles Beresford

prophecy, an outsider's diatribes (against English structures of church, state and 'race') and an orientalist exoticizing of the East- to express his own sense of Jewishness."¹⁵⁹ Lawson misses the anti-Jewish canards about Jews and commerce that Siegfried deploys here. In 1965, Siegfried responded to a friendly critique of his artistic talent that "the daemon in me is Jewish," and he referred to his origins as being of "Cheshire Cheese Farmers and Oriental Aristocrats."¹⁶⁰ Siegfried internalized the conventional English antisemitism of the twentieth century as he had been left to be raised by his Anglican mother on the death of his Jewish father at age eight. He described his private income as "Semitic sovereigns," in a letter to his friend Robert Graves.

¹⁵⁹ Peter Lawson, "Siegfried Sassoon," *Jewish Quarterly*, 47:1 (2000): 59.

¹⁶⁰ Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Making of a War Poet* (London: Routledge), 47. Siegfried Sassoon to Dame Felicitas Corrigan, 25 June 1965.

“Yes, you can touch my Banker when you need him. Why keep a Jewish friend unless you bleed him?” He also remarked in his war diaries on “awful conversations in Pullman carriage by Jew profiteers.”¹⁶¹ Siegfried’s friends said his hands “were somewhat over-illustrative” and that he had “a very definite oriental streak” of cruelty.¹⁶² He was also described as being “like all oriental men... very secretive – Reticent and very eccentric.”¹⁶³ Siegfried felt connected to his Sassoon side of the family through his self-identified mystic role in poetry. He wrote to his friend Dame Felicitas Corrigan in June of 1965 that “as a poetic spirit I have always felt or wanted to be—a kind of minor prophet.”¹⁶⁴ Through his writings and the writings of his friends, one can see how even after some of the Sassoons entered elite British society, they had failed to escape their oriental and Jewish origins in the eyes of others and their own as well. Siegfried’s own perceptions of his family’s otherness based on stigmas he encountered reflect the frustrations of an assimilated generation yet one unable to escape the stigma of their Jewish origins.

Sir Philip Sassoon

The famous bachelor politician and host, Philip Sassoon, Siegfried’s cousin, similarly questioned his Jewish “oriental” heritage and “hinted that he was of Parsee stock, aware perhaps how quickly the English could turn on Jews, how much they remained essentially outsiders.”¹⁶⁵ Philip was reacting both to other people labeling and dismissing him as a Jew as well as to his sense of anxiety about his origins. Despite his family’s integration into elite British society,

¹⁶¹ Selected quotations from Siegfried Sassoon’s *Diaries 1915-1918* (London: Faber, 1983) and *Diaries 1920-1922* (London: Faber, 1981). Lawson, “Siegfried,” 59-60.

¹⁶² A letter from Siegfried Sassoon’s wife, Hester Gatty, to her sister-in-law, Pamela Gatty c. 1960 in The Gatty Papers at CUL. Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried’s Journey*, (London: Faber, 1945), 32.

¹⁶³ Letter from Stephan Tennant to G.A. David, 12 Nov. 1971, Collection of Hugo Vickers. Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, 16.

¹⁶⁴ Siegfried Sassoon to Dame Felicitas Corrigan, 25 June 1965. *Ibid.* 47.

¹⁶⁵ Max Egremont, “Siegfried Sassoon,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 2006.

Phillip was still stigmatized for his Jewishness and part Middle Eastern origins. The drawing by the political satirist, Max Beerbohm, in 1913 highlights Philip as a gilded outsider status in the twentieth century as he is dressed in elite clothing but distinctly different. Philip Sassoon is drawn to look Oriental with his crossed legs, narrow form, and pointed eyes. His Jewishness is



“Sir Phillip Sassoon in Strange Company” from “A Survey by Max Beerbohm” – Heinemann (1921)

depicted through his large and pointed nose. The caption reads, “Sir Phillip Sassoon in strange company,” and he is made to look particularly out of place surrounded by large and boisterous Englishmen in Parliament. Charlie Chaplin in his autobiography described Philip as “a picturesque

personality, handsome and exotic looking.”¹⁶⁶ Phillip had friends or at least acquaintances in some of the most influential circles of the twentieth century, from Winston Churchill to Edward, Prince of Wales; his Jewish identity and the suspicions regarding his sexual identity never stopped his lavish parties and political ambitions. As the son at the intersection between two Jewish dynasties, the Sassoons and the Rothschilds, Philip represented his families’ social aspirations to gain access to the upper echelons and extend the rights of Jews in Britain.

¹⁶⁶ Charlie Chaplin and David Robinson, *My Autobiography* (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2012), 66.

Many in his acquaintance thought him to be “strange, unknowable and, oriental.” Others were not so ambiguous; Virginia Woolf once called him ““an underbred Whitechapel Jew.””¹⁶⁷ Philip had never lived in the slums of Whitechapel, of course, where East European Jewish immigrants settled. Wealth and formidable allies did not fully protect the Sassoons from the anti-Semitism that always boiled below the surface of English political and social life. Philip’s cousin, Charles de Rothschild, once told a friend, “if I ever have a son he will be instructed in boxing and jujitsu before he enters school, as Jew hunts such as I experienced are a very one-sided amusement.”¹⁶⁸ On September 22nd, 1937, the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, along with other news sources, reported that “the anti-Semitic slogan used by British Fascists, ‘Perish Judah!’ was painted in large letters today on the walls of Trent Park, the country home of Sir Philip Sassoon, under-secretary for air. Guards have been placed outside the entrance gates to the estate.”¹⁶⁹ Philip passed away due to complications from influenza just before the advent of World War II in 1939. Philip’s experiences with anti-Semitism and being exoticized by the public reflect the Sassoons’ uphill battle for acceptance once the family moved their operations to England and tried to integrate into elite English society.

Rachel (Sassoon) Beer

Born in Bombay just as her father, Sassoon David Sassoon, left for England in 1858, Rachel Sassoon grew up in England after the age of two. In a letter she wrote to her mother, Farha, in 1871 at age thirteen, she noted: “I had a lesson in swimming from a great woman just

¹⁶⁷ Ferdinand Mount, “History of a Fox Hunting Man,” *The Guardian – London Review of Books*, August 5, 2003.

¹⁶⁸ Todd M. Endelman, *Leaving the Jewish Fold: Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 109.

¹⁶⁹ Vol. 111. No. 42, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, September 22, 1937.

like a man with her hair cut short like a man, too.”¹⁷⁰ Already one can see Rachel Sassoon’s interest in gender and modern femininity when she compliments a woman who crossed traditional gender lines. After her marriage to Frederick Arthur Beer, whose family of wealthy financiers had converted from Judaism to Anglican Christianity, she was disowned just like her brother, Alfred.

Through her husband’s family, she became the first woman editor of a major newspaper in England as editor in chief of both *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times*. She assumed these positions in 1891 and took over completely by 1896 when her husband fell ill. Beer’s claim to fame in the newspaper world came with her work on the Dreyfus Affair. With two specials to the *Observer* during September of 1898, Beer found and obtained a confession from Major Esterhazy, the officer who had produced false documents to aid in Jewish officer Dreyfus’s treason conviction.¹⁷¹ The story sparked an outcry and eventually led to Dreyfus’s release and pardon. Throughout her tenure as editor in chief, Beer was particularly concerned with Jewish causes even though she had converted upon her marriage. At the Women’s International Congress in 1899, Rachel Beer told the gathered group, “It was Victor Hugo who said that the nineteenth century is the woman’s century. At the root of the whole question lies the demand for the right — no, not to vote — but to labour and to receive adequate pay for work done.”¹⁷² Through her editorial work, Beer espoused progressive ideals for both women and Jews under “The World’s Work,” an editorial focusing on social issues in *The Observer*.

¹⁷⁰ Letter from Rachel Sassoon to her mother, Farha, in 1871.4°1790, box 8b. 1 (7093), DSA, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹⁷¹ Rachel Beer, “Light Upon the Dreyfus Case: Major Esterhazy in London,” *The Observer*, 18 September 1898.

¹⁷² From the July 1899 International Congress of Women. *International Council of Women: Report of Transactions*. (London: T. Fisher Unwin Paternoster Square, 1900), 384.

Beer never hid or discounted her Baghdadi Jewish heritage and often played to it as seen in the image to the right where she dresses in “traditional” clothing for a fancy-dress ball, most likely the one hosted by the Duchess of Devonshire in 1897. The family’s strategic auto-orientalism reflects elite British society’s fascination with the Far East and even how the Sassoons at times presented themselves to the broader public during their century-long engagement in imperial trade and integration into British imperial society.



A newspaper proprietor once crudely remarked that Beer’s complexion was “a suggestion of un-European darkness.”¹⁷³ Esterhazy, whom Beer had brought down with her editorials, remarked with antisemitism that she had “a blackish chicken neck, plucked of all its feathers...the most fantastic Jewish nose that was ever produced by the twelve tribes [and] a ruffled mane, not curly but woolly—characteristic of this race, and badly dyed with piss-colour henna.”¹⁷⁴ However, to Beer, her heritage was something to celebrate, and she often did so lavishly in dress and through decorations in her home on Mayfair. When she passed away in 1927, she left the bulk of her fortune to her nieces and nephews. While she wished to be buried next to her husband, her family refused her wishes and buried her on unconsecrated grounds, her tombstone simply stating, “Daughter of David Sassoon.” Rachel

¹⁷³ Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, *The First Lady of Fleet Street: The Life, Fortune and Tragedy of Rachel Beer* (London: Robson, 2012), 244.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 219.

Beer's work with Jewish causes and her campaigns against antisemitism show the ways the family stayed connected to their Jewish networks even as they intermarried and left the faith.

The third generation's integration into elite circles in Britain during the early twentieth century is bound up with changing definitions of belonging. They do not only struggle to belong to British elite society but also their Jewish communities as a native-born British generation. Just as their parents and grandparents negotiated shifts in their status as insiders and outsiders of imperial hierarchies, the younger generation faced different dynamics as Europe confronted new concepts of nationalism. While on the surface it might seem like the Sassoon family achieved the status of an imperial insider by this interwar period through their elite friendships, ascension to the peerage, and their economic activities, the third generation's internal conflicts and othering by the broader society reflects that, perhaps, they only reached a quasi-insider status.

This thesis has analyzed the 1830s to the interwar period of the Sassoons' navigation of and integration into British imperial society as Baghdadi Jews from Bombay, India to London, England. Yet the integration narrative breaks down around World War I as the third generation's experience with native or near-native-born status in England is marked by assimilation and antisemitism. Well into the twentieth century, more than a century after the first Sassoon left Iraq, the family still dealt with issues of integration as a group that intersected many identities from "Arab Merchant Prince," "Parsee Trader," "Maltese dog name bearer," "British peer," to "Jew." Constructions of identity are always entangled with questions of nationality, ethnicity, religion, and race. The Sassoons' negotiations of these constructions over geographical, cultural, and temporal change throughout this thesis represent the constantly shifting landscapes that define questions of identity and difference. In societies without pluralism, minority groups will struggle to maintain their cultural identity as the majority works to assimilate them. These

questions do not end but rather continue within new historical contexts. The upheavals caused by World War I and the next four decades of conflict in Europe would shape the Sassoons' navigation of identity just as British imperialism had in the prior century. Interest in the Sassoons has often stemmed from their dynastic rise or their triumphalist narrative as underdogs, however, behind the façade of a powerful family my thesis explores the ongoing negotiation of minority status in a constantly changing world.

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