

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS RELEASE

PUBLICITY DIVISION · MINISTRY OF CULTURE · CITY HALL SINGAPORE 6

National Archives and
Records Centre, Singapore.

15 APR 1978

Acc. No.	NARC
78 0051	29

88. 10. 3

MC/APR/6/78 (FOREIGN AFFAIRS)

SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, MR. S. RAJARATNAM, AT THE DINNER AND DANCE OF THE HAGHAIN ABOOTH SYNAGOGUE AT HYATT HOTEL ON SATURDAY, APRIL 8, 1978 AT 8.30 P.M.

I and my wife are particularly happy to be here tonight to participate in the centenary celebrations of the Maghain Abooth Synagogue because there was one occasion in my life when I successfully passed myself off as a Chinese Jew. This historic feat was accomplished in Britain when I was a student there before the war. The occasion was a convention of Chinese students held in Melyn Garden City. I was the only non-Chinese student present at the convention. How this came to be is a somewhat devious and shameful story but it was done through the ingenuity of a Malayan Chinese friend of mine who thought it right and proper that one week's board and lodging for two pounds in congenial surroundings was a bargain that should also be extended to a fellow Malayan who had the misfortune not to be a Chinese.

Anyway at breakfast on the first morning I was seated with my friend at a table consisting wholly of Chinese students from China. As the Chinese are by nature a very polite and unemotional people they just smiled and stared at the brown-skinned and very uncelestial looking Chinese in their midst. But as the minutes ticked away I could see that curiosity was getting the better of them and it finally did when one of them smiled even more politely and popped the question:

"And what part of China do you come from?"

I assumed that what he meant was: "How the hell did you get in?"

So with as great a composure as I could summon I said: "Oh, I am a Chinese Jew from Turkestan."

I expected2/-

I expected that this demonstration of quick wittedness would evoke appreciative laughter all round. Instead a mask of seriousness came over everyone and I thought even a warm feeling of fellowship as well. Soon I was inundated with questions about social, political and cultural conditions in Chinese Turkestan. At first I thought they were baiting me in spirit of fun and since I knew nothing about Chinese Turkestan my answers progressively became outrageously improbable.

But my audience, it became apparent, were becoming more excited with my report of the way of life of Chinese Jews in Turkestan. To my horror I realised that they were taking me seriously and that unless I stopped forthwith there was going to be a lot of lost faces all round.

So I broke down and confessed that I was in fact a Ceylonese kid from Seremban who had been smuggled in to the convention by my good Chinese friend.

I am happy to say that everything was sorted in the end quite satisfactorily. Then I asked them whether they really believed that I was a Chinese Jew from Turkestan. They said yes because there was a large community of Chinese Jews in that part of China and that they are dark skinned and that in their opinion I approximated their conception of a Chinese Jew.

The point of this lengthy anecdote is the uniqueness of the Jewish people is that they appear to be represented in almost every part of the world. Now it is true migrations of people have taken place from time immemorial and Singapore is an example of a country created by wandering migrants who have unpacked their bags. But I can think of no other people who are as widely represented throughout the world as the Jewish people. I was not so sure about Chinese Turkestan because I did not think it was the sort of country anyone would care to migrate to but that little episode in Welyn Garden City proved to me that I had underestimated the power of the Jewish connection.

Now I3/-

Now I do not know what the Jewish people accomplished in Chinese Turkestan but I do know that they accomplished a great deal in and for Singapore. They are not and never were a large community but then I am one of those who believe that small is beautiful. I have to because Singapore is small and I myself belong to a community which is small.

But the contributions the Singapore Jews have made to the development of Singapore is out of all proportion to their numbers which goes to show, as the family planning people tell you, that what counts in the end is quality and not quantity.

There are many ways of approaching the history of the Jewish community in Singapore and one way is to study the history of their synagogues for, as I understand it, it is through their synagogues that the Jews have maintained their identity and integrity for over 2,000 years through both good and bad times - and they have had many bad times.

In Singapore we have a Synagogue Street but you can walk your feet off there today and you will not find a single synagogue. But then you can walk along Beach Road today searching till doomsday for a stretch of beach; or along Dhoby Ghaut to get your laundry done or along Kandang Kerbau where the confinement of mothers rather than of cattle is what you will find.

But there was a synagogue in Synagogue Street and it was located at Boat Quay. It was there because among the earliest merchants who came to Singapore, immediately after its founding by Raffles, were Jewish traders from India and West Asia. And the Boat Quay area was quite clearly the place to do trade. But as trade prospered and the Jewish community grew and Synagogue Street became congested and the synagogue itself too small the synagogue was shifted to Waterloo Street which, as you all know, commemorates an event which Englishmen remember with pride but which the French have no difficulty forgetting.

The synagogue was built in Waterloo Street not to commemorate the vagaries of Anglo-French relations because at that time Waterloo Street was a prestigious residential area and therefore a measure

growing prosperity of the Jewish community. You have only to list out the street names of Singapore to realise the eminence to which members of the Jewish community had risen with Singapore's development.

It would also appear that the early Jewish settlers were male chauvinists. It would seem that in its original state the Waterloo synagogue had no provision for seating the ladies. I do not know whether it was an oversight or a deliberate assertion of male dominance.

However I am happy to say that the matter was partially corrected by Manasseh Meyer who, at his own expense, had a gallery erected for the ladies.

But according to the souvenir publication that was sent to me and, I quote, the gallery "was a makeshift affair using wooden slats through which the ladies could be seen all too clearly."

However, a few years later, according to this publication "when an extension was added to the main building, the ladies were provided with the solidly constructed gallery that is still in use today."

I myself have never been to the Maghain Aboth Synagogue but I like to think that despite the greater solidness of the gallery no obstruction has been placed to hinder visibility - either way.

The Jewish community in Singapore today numbers no more than perhaps 500 from a peak of some 2,500. But as I said their contributions to the life and growth of Singapore far exceeds what mere numbers suggest. I shall be most surprised indeed if I am around to witness the 200th anniversary of the Maghain Aboth Synagogue but I am sure there will be a Jewish community to celebrate it. I am sure they will be proud to be Singaporeans and not ashamed to be Jews either. There are many parts of the world where to be a minority is to be resented and be oppressed. In the kind of Singapore we are creating there are no majorities and minorities but simply good men and bad men with the good men whatever their race, language and religion invariably triumphing over the bad men whatever their race, language and religion.
