

A former Malaysian Jew retraces his childhood footsteps in George Town.

FEATURE



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"You haven't been here?" he asked in amazement as he wove his way through the crowded square. "This place is an institution!"

Twenty minutes and a neat pile of satay sticks later, Jacobs, 53, spoke of the reason behind his unplanned trip back to Penang.

"My nanny passed away," he said. "My sister, Meeda, and I are here to attend her cremation and set up an education fund in her name. She was a wonderful woman... really wonderful... and we want her to have a legacy."

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His eyes misted over at the gentle pull of memories and he concentrated on his last bite of satay before clearing his throat.

"Her name was Soundravalli," he said. "She brought me up when my parents left me with my grandparents to work in Kuala Lumpur. I grew up speaking Tamil."

He tossed out a few Tamil words, unaware of how delightfully startling it was to hear them roll off a Pan Asian tongue. Then again Jacobs has never felt like he was cut from different cloth. Not even when he was a Malaysian Jew in Penang.

Penang heralded the arrival of the Malaysian Jewish community in the 19th century when Baghdadi Jews set foot on its shores to explore the trade opportunities there.

The first known Jew to make Malaya his home was Ezekiel Aaron Menasseh in 1895. Menasseh claimed to be the only practising Jew in Malaya for three decades but the general census of Jewish settlers in Penang (1881-1941) showed that 172 Jews already lived there in 1899.

World War II, however, drove a significant number of Jews to Singapore and a majority chose to build new homes there as well as in Australia, Israel and the United States. The Jewish Welfare Board of Singapore recorded that by 1963, only 20 Jewish families remained in Malaya. One of them was Jacobs' family.

The hazan's grandson

Jacobs' father, Abraham Jacobs, was only five when his father, Hayoo Jacobs, packed them up and left Baghdad for Singapore in 1936. But Hayoo wasn't a tradesman. Nor was he just any other Jew.

Hayoo was a hazan (the leader of a synagogue), a shochet (one who slaughters cattle and fowl for kosher consumption) and a mohel (one who performs ritual Jewish circumcisions).

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Abraham grew up juggling a myriad of professions including that of a fighter pilot and professional boxer. At one point, he even enjoyed a French dairy board consular status with the French government. He eventually met and married Tan Kok Choo who would go on to become a popular RTM broadcaster.

Jacobs, Meeda and their younger brother, David, were born in the synagogue where they lived for most of their childhood.

"It was a very normal childhood," Jacobs recalled. "We went to school, we played with the neighbourhood kids. Everyone knew we were Jews but no one cared. That's the beauty of Penangites."

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When he turned 13, Joseph's parents returned from Kuala Lumpur and the family left the synagogue for a proper home in a residential area. Four years later, Abraham had a sense of foreboding that the future of Jews in Malaysia would be short-lived.

"Times were relaxed during (first prime minister) Tunku Abdul Rahman's reign," Jacobs said. "But when (second prime minister) Tun Abdul Razak stepped in, things began to change."

"My father decided to move to Australia in 1975. We settled down in Sydney and I surrendered my Malaysian passport the next year. When (fourth prime minister) Mahathir (Mohamad) came into power, it was obvious that Malaysia was no longer a good place for Jews."

Yet two decades later, Jacobs returned to his motherland. Weary of Sydney's legal scene, he sought brief respite as a law lecturer in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). And when classes were over, he indulged in his other love, photography.

After his work was splashed across local magazines, Jacobs landed a plum three-year contract to supply images for calenders and postcards in Malaysia and Singapore. But it was two particular assignments that still makes him break out into a broad grin. The first was the 1996 Tour de Langkawi.

"One of my photos was chosen as the backdrop for the volunteer certificates on which Mahathir signed," he chuckled. "I was meant to receive a certificate and Mahathir would have shaken my hand if I'd shown up for the ceremony!"

The second was an expedition to Sarawak to shoot promotional images for the Sarawak Tourism Board. A German woman, Susanne, was on the same expedition to research a book on Malaysia, which coincidentally contained a number of Jacobs' photographs. Today, Jacobs and Susanne live in Cairns with their two young daughters, Annalisa and Julia.

"We've brought the kids back to Sarawak to show them where we met and also to Penang to see where I grew up," Jacobs said. "But returning to Penang fills me with anger and sadness. The development here has robbed it of its beauty. It has ruined Penang."

The synagogue's story

But the hand of urbanity spared Jacobs' childhood home. The

82-year-old synagogue closed its doors in 1976 due to a lack of quorum and was subsequently bought over by a young Chinese man who turned it into a photography studio.



The next morning Jacobs and Meeda, 54, paid their old home a visit. Standing outside the synagogue in the early morning light, they gazed at it with affection and a touch of bemused wonderment. Jacobs patted one of the pillars and murmured, “This used to be mustard yellow.”

“It’s strange coming back,” Meeda observed. She gestured at the knee-deep drain running outside. “I once fell in here as a child. It seemed so huge then but now everything looks so small!”

The two traded memories as they glanced around their surroundings. Stories of eating toast across the street or fried mee down the road

after Sabbath. Of the ice kacang man whose wrinkled hands and nail-less fingers both fascinated and terrified Meeda.

Of the rickshaw man who sought shade outside the synagogue everyday and who gifted them with a miniature model of a rickshaw. Of the coffeeshop on the other block where the owner’s son supposedly feasted on baby rats for health and virility.

Of the innocuous establishment where the famous cabaret dancer, Rose Chan, once performed. And of Ahmed, their odd-job man who turned out to be an undercover official in the Japanese army, and saved their grandfather’s life when he was captured by the Japanese.

These precious memories are made even rarer by the erasing of the Jewish presence in Penang. Yahudi Road has since been renamed Jalan Zainal Abidin, leaving a Jewish cemetery as the only remaining significant mark of the community’s existence.

And for this reason alone, Arden Leong forked out half-a-million ringgit four years ago to buy over the former synagogue. When the government began tearing down old buildings in Penang, he feared that the synagogue would suffer the same fate. So when he heard that the Tan family were looking to sell, he didn’t need to think twice.

“The owners were the Tan family who lived in KL,” Leong explained. “But my family had been renting the synagogue for 18 years. My father used it as a pharmaceutical store. Then my wife turned it into a flower shop.”

“Today I use it for my design and print business, as well as a community digital media education centre. I will never sell this place. If it is broken down, a big part of Penang’s history will be lost forever.”

Leong’s sensitivity to historical significance is evident in the manner in which he fortified the building’s structure without altering its original design. Even the floor tiles were not replaced. The synagogue is now a gazetted pre-war site and a point of homage for visiting Jews.

“A group of rabbis in their full regalia visited once,” Leong laughed. “The last Jewish group was here about a year back. We were even receiving newsletters from Israel at one point. The Jacobs have also visited and are very happy that this building is being taken care of.”

Preserving a slice of the past

Leong isn’t the only one adamant to keep Penang’s Jewish history

alive. The honorary secretary of the Penang Heritage Trust, Clement Liang, has declared Jalan Nagore as a Jewish enclave and would have a signboard put up outside the synagogue if not for lack of funds.

“I say this to the government: if you don’t want to recognise Jews as part of Malaysian history, then recognise them as part of Penang



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history," he said. "Because we're proud that people from other countries chose Penang as their home. At least the Penang Museum acknowledges their part in our history."

Liang was the Jacobs' neighbour after they moved out of the synagogue and their childhood friendship has survived the years and distance.

"I used to go swimming with David," he smiled. "Our mothers were good friends. They were such an active family and their father loved performing magic tricks!"

"But they were a tight-knit community and no outsiders were ever allowed to attend their celebrations. So we would just watch from a distance. I wonder what they thought about that."

Funnily enough, the same thought struck Jacobs as he stood outside the former synagogue that morning.

"I wonder what people thought when we held rituals and festivals here," he mused aloud. Meeda shrugged.

"I don't think anyone actually thought anything of it," she said. "We were just Jews practising our faith."

(The last known remaining Jew in Penang today is 80-something David Mordecai, the former general manager for the E&O Hotel.)