



## *Note on Names and Currencies*

### NAMES

Cities and countries in this book are referred to by the name used in the historical context, so Bombay rather than Mumbai, Ceylon rather than Sri Lanka, etc. Similarly, names in China are what the family used in its correspondence.

With regard to members of the Sassoon family, one point is worth mentioning: most anglicized their names, and so Abdallah became Albert and Farha became Flora. Arabic names are used in the book until officially changed; so it is Abdallah until he settled in London, when he adopted the English name Albert.

Some family members used the term *ha-tsa-'ir* (the young) to distinguish them from older members who were still alive. Thus Sassoon David Sassoon sometimes signed his letters as ‘the young Sassoon’ in order not to be confused with his father, who was still alive.

### CURRENCIES

Obviously the pound sterling and the US dollar have undergone dramatic changes since the nineteenth century, and both are worth considerably less than 150 years ago due to inflation. The website Measuring Worth (<https://www.measuringworth.com/>) was used to bring a sense of values today, although this is far from being accurate as there are multiple ways to measure the value of currencies.

As most of the story takes place in India, the Indian currency, the rupee, is mentioned regularly. The Appendix compares the value of the rupee in pounds sterling and US dollars from 1850 to 1910.



## *Acknowledgements*

This book started with a letter in 2012 from Joseph (Joey) Sassoon in Scotland, and to him and his children, Tania and Peter, I owe a big debt. In the last nine years I have accumulated more debts to many people and institutions, and I ask for forgiveness from and offer sincere apologies to anyone I have overlooked.

My journey for the sake of the book was not unlike the Sassoons' passage in the early nineteenth century: travel in many countries and cities, but this time to undertake research and to work in archives. It began in London, then continued to Jerusalem, Mumbai, Pune, Shanghai and other locations. This book, I believe, is the first full-length work to make significant use of the David Sassoon Archives at the National Library in Jerusalem, which are mostly in Baghdadi-Jewish dialect. For the support I received, my gratitude is especially due to the National Library and to Rachel Misrati, who was phenomenally helpful. The assistance of other archives and archivists was also invaluable: the Sir Ellice Victor Elias Sassoon Papers and Photographs at the Southern Methodist University, Dallas, and the archivist, Anne Peterson; The Rothschild Archive, London, and its archivist, Melanie Aspey; and the Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins, and its owner, Ken, who has been extremely generous with his time and knowledge. Other archives and libraries were instrumental as well in making the book possible: Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center Archives (Tel Aviv); Brighton and Hove Archives; British Library (London); British National Archives (London); China Association Papers (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London); Church of England Archives (London); Indian National Archives (Delhi); Kadoorie Archives (Hong Kong); Metropolitan Archives (London); Ottoman

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Archives (Istanbul); Shanghai Municipal Archives – and to all of them I am truly grateful.

A number of wonderful assistants helped me along this long road. I was extremely fortunate to have met Doron Goldstein, a true polymath who proved a genius at decoding every letter and article and assisted me in deciphering the handwriting and some of the jargon in thousands of documents in the David Sassoon Archives. He is fluent in Hebrew, and his knowledge of Arabic and its different dialects, as well as of Persian and Turkish, was priceless. Benan Grams and Fatih Çalışır helped with the Ottoman Archives and Turkish manuscripts, and Yaqiong Wang with the Shanghai Municipal Archives. In Washington DC, Rebecca Murphy worked with me in gathering much of the data and scouring newspapers, and Kaylee Steck was not only a great researcher, but showed organizational skills and a depth of knowledge about the material that were simply astonishing; without Kaylee, it is doubtful I would have been able to master the immense amount of information collected for this book. She also helped me with sketching the family trees, with maps of Bombay and Shanghai, and with the initial search for pictures. Lauren Stricker indexed many documents and other material to make everything more accessible while I was writing. Sydney Roeder helped in later stages of editing.

In some places, locals who became friends offered me information. Simin Patel in Mumbai, an expert on the city, aided me with some of the locations and put me in touch with people who knew about the Sassoons. Kayan Ghyara in Pune provided me with details of the Sassoons' properties in the city. Cyrus Patel and Nevil Patel not only helped me with my research in Mahabaleshwar, but thanks to their wonderful hospitality I spent three nights at beautiful Glenogle (the Sassoons' house in the mountains), a stunning location – it was an incredible experience to be in the place where some of the main characters in this book spent part of the year. In New Delhi, Max Rodenbeck and his wife, Karima Khalil, were fantastic hosts while I stayed in their house; and Max joined me on my first trip to Mahabaleshwar. In Shanghai, my nephew, Omer, who lived in China at the time, accompanied me to all the Sassoon buildings; and the staff at what is now the Fairmont Peace Hotel (premises owned by the Sassoons in the 1930s) were most welcoming and even provided

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

me with plans of the building and books about its history. In Dallas, I had the pleasure of dining with Evelyn Cox (niece of Barnsie, Victor's wife), who shared with me what Victor Sassoon meant to her family during the times they spent with him in Dallas, England and the Bahamas.

Virginia Myers helped with editing in the first phases before the text was passed to Penguin. Some members of the Sassoon 'clan' supplied me with incredible pictures, letters and an extensive family tree: Sybil Sassoon, Hugh Sassoon, Joanna Sassoon (Perth) and Edwina Sassoon (London). I also discussed the topic a number of times with James Sassoon (London), who made useful suggestions and recounted family stories.

I am deeply indebted to many friends and colleagues who offered much support and insight, and read parts of the manuscript: John McNeill, Charles King, William Clarence Smith, Diana Kim, Stefan Eich, Paul French, Harold James, Nancy Berg, Kevin O'Rourke, Zvi Ben-Dor and Emma Rothschild. Eugene Rogan, Richard Ovenden and Dina Khoury have been wonderful with their advice, encouragement and friendship, as they were for previous books. John Makinson gave me invaluable advice and suggested sending a proposal to Penguin that ended up being this book. Once again, I discussed the text and expressed my satisfaction or frustration at every stage of research and writing with my childhood friend Terry Somekh. Evan Osnos, who knows China well, introduced me to people who lived or live in Shanghai and was most supportive of the project. With Robert Worth, I bounced around many ideas about the writing of the text. To all those friends and colleagues, a million thanks.

I would also like to express my deepest appreciation to the different institutions that invited me to talk about the book or aspects of it. I greatly benefited from the comments and questions raised by the academics and audiences who engaged with this research: Princeton Workshop of Telling Histories of Families; Harvard Business School; Jewish Country Houses at the Modern Jewish History Seminar, Oxford University (run by Professor Abigail Green); Peking University Middle East Seminar; Brandeis University; the Jewish Museum in London; St Antony's College, Oxford; and, last but not least, my home university, Georgetown, where I gave two talks over the last four years at the

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

superb History Department and my brilliant colleagues read and commented on every phrase, as well as the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, which has been my immediate home for more than a decade. I thank all my friends and colleagues at the Center and at Georgetown University. I had the good luck of being a fellow at the Katz Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, which allowed me to write and exchange ideas and create friendships with fellows there.

I am much beholden to many people at Penguin Random House: especially Stuart Proffitt, who championed the idea for this book and pushed me to think differently, which led to many proposals before Penguin signed a deal; and Ben Sinyor, who accompanied the manuscript from the start, edited this book and discussed every word. Alice Skinner was superbly helpful in the later stages of the book. My agent, Felicity Bryan, was an incredible woman who offered her advice even during her illness and in the last few weeks of her life. I am fortunate that her colleague Catherine Clark took over the project, and she has been a staunch advocate from day one. Cecilia Mackay has been most helpful with all the images in this book, a huge task indeed. My copy editor, Mark Handsley, has done a brilliant job with the text and the references.

My family has remained as supportive of me as ever in more ways than one: my 95-year-old mother is still keeping an eye on what I am doing; my daughter, Rachel, contributed by reading a number of chapters and commenting on them; her husband, Daniel, also read parts of the manuscript and shared some interesting insights. But my greatest support has been the same person who has accompanied me at every stage of my last three books: Helen Jackson not only was my true partner throughout these years of research and writing, but joined me on a trip to India and gave me invaluable help in my research in London and Jerusalem. It is hard to imagine that I would have been able to do all this without her.

Finally, in the last three years, a new person entered my life: my granddaughter, Aya, to whom this book is dedicated. Her laughter and smiles melted my heart and made me forget all the difficulties of the book and the pandemic. I call her my *fidwa*, a term of endearment in Baghdadi dialect which can be freely translated as someone whom you love so much, you are willing to sacrifice your life for them. So, thank you, *fidwa*, for all the pleasure and joy you have brought into my life.

## *List of Illustrations*

Every effort has been made to contact all copyright holders. The publisher will be pleased to amend in future printings any errors or omissions brought to their attention.

### COLOUR PLATES

1. David Sassoon, c. 1850. (Reproduced with permission from the Sassoon Family Album, *Ashley Park*)
2. Farha Sassoon, undated photograph. (Reproduced with permission from the Sassoon Family Album, *Ashley Park*)
3. The opium clipper *Red Rover* off Singapore. Oil painting, Anglo-Chinese school, nineteenth century. (Photo: Bonham's)
4. The gateway to Sassoon Docks, Bombay. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
5. Memorandum issued by Sassoon J. David & Co., Bombay, 28 April 1911. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
6. Sans Souci, Byculla. (Photo: by courtesy of Edwina Sassoon)
7. Sassoon family crest, Masina Hospital, Mumbai. (Photo: copyright © Arun Bhargava / Dreamstime)
8. Magen David Synagogue, Mumbai. (Photo: Dinodia / Alamy)
9. Mausoleum of David Sassoon, Pune. (Photo: Boaz Rottem / Alamy)
10. Ohel David Synagogue, Pune. (Photo: ePhotocorp / Alamy)
11. Interior of Ohel David Synagogue, Pune. (Photo: Boaz Rottem / Stockimo / Alamy)
12. Statue of David Sassoon, 1865, by Thomas Woolner, in the David Sassoon Library, Mumbai. (Photo: Helen Jackson)
13. Albert Sassoon, caricature by Spy (Leslie Ward) from *Vanity Fair*, 1879. (Photo: Chronicle / Alamy)



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

14. Elias Sassoon, undated photograph. (Illustration from Arnold Wright, *Twentieth-century Impressions of Hong-kong, Shanghai, and other Treaty Ports of China*, pub. 1908)
15. Reuben Sassoon, caricature by Spy (Leslie Ward) from *Vanity Fair*, 1890. (Photo: Artokoloro / Alamy)
16. Ketubah (marriage contract) of Reuben and Katherine Sassoon, 1853. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
17. Edward Sassoon, caricature by Spy (Leslie Ward) from *Vanity Fair*, 1900. (Photo: Peter Jackson / Bridgeman Images)
18. John Singer Sargent, *Portrait of Lady Sassoon*. Oil on canvas, 1907. Private collection. (Photo: Bridgeman Images)
19. Envelope sent from David Sassoon & Co.'s agents in Karachi to head office in London, 1903. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
20. Farha and Suleiman at their wedding, Bombay, 1876. (Photo: Library of Congress)
21. Agent's label for E. D. Sassoon, Manchester. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
22. Agent's label for Dawn Mills Company Ltd. ( (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
23. Agent's label for Rachel Sassoon Mill. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
24. Agent's label for E. D. Sassoon, Manchester. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
25. Flora Sassoon in court dress, 1907. (Illustration from Stanley Jackson, *The Sassoons*, Heinemann, 1968)
26. Gilt-silver-encased Torah scroll and Haftarah scroll, 1893, owned by Flora Sassoon. (Photo: courtesy of Sotheby's Inc., copyright © 2020)
27. Silver and enamel Torah shield of 1782, bought by Reuben Sassoon before 1887. (Photo: courtesy of Sotheby's Inc., copyright © 2020)
28. Siegfried Sassoon with his father Alfred and brothers Michael and Hamo, 1887. (Reproduced with permission from the Sassoon Family Album, *Ashley Park*)
29. Philip Sassoon, c. 1915–20. (Photo: Library of Congress)
30. Siegfried Sassoon, c. 1915. (Photo: AF Fotografie / Alamy)
31. John Singer Sargent, *Portrait of Philip Sassoon*, 1923. (Photo: copyright © Tate, London)
32. Winston S. Churchill, *The Dining-Room at Port Lympne*, 1921. (Photo: TopFoto; copyright © Churchill Heritage Limited)

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

33. Philip Sassoon bows before the King and Queen at the National Gallery, London, 1934. (Photo: copyright © National Portrait Gallery, London)
34. Victor Sassoon, photograph of warships in Shanghai Harbour, 1937. (Photo: Sassoon Papers and Photographs, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University (SMU), Dallas, Texas)
35. Victor with Marlene Dietrich and other female guests at a party in Hollywood, 1940. (Photo: Sassoon Papers and Photographs, DeGolyer Library, SMU)
36. Victor with Charlie Chaplin, Hollywood, 1940. (Photo: Sassoon Papers and Photographs, DeGolyer Library, SMU)
37. Victor and Barnsie, Bahamas, 1961. (Photo: Sassoon Papers and Photographs, DeGolyer Library, SMU)
38. The Bund, Shanghai. (Photo: Siwabud Veerapaisarn / Dreamstime)
39. David Sassoon Library, Mumbai. (Photo: Shutterstock)
40. Stamp featuring David Sassoon, India, 1998. (Photo: author Collection)
41. Stamp featuring Siegfried Sassoon, St Helena, 2008 (Photo: by courtesy of Joanna Sassoon)
42. Stamp featuring Victor Sassoon, Bahamas, 2011. (Photo: by courtesy of Joanna Sassoon)

## ILLUSTRATIONS IN THE TEXT

- p. 3. View of Baghdad, c. 1850. Illustration from *Panorama Universal*, 1851. (Photo: Prisma Archivo / Alamy)
- p. 9. View of Bushire, Iran, c. 1830s. Watercolour by Charles Hamilton Smith. (Photo: copyright © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London)
- p. 16. View of Bombay from Colaba. Illustration from José M. Gonsalves, *Lithographic Views of Bombay*, 1826. (Photo: copyright © British Library / Bridgeman Images)
- p. 19. Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, engraving after a photograph by Sorabjee Samsetjee, Bombay, 1859.
- p. 20. Weighing cotton for the English market, Bombay Cotton Exchange. Engraving from the *Illustrated London News*, 1862. (Photo: Dinodia / Alamy)
- p. 29. *Papaver somniferum* (opium poppy). Engraving after M. A. Burnett, c. 1853. (Photo: Wellcome Library, London)
- p. 32. British troops capturing Chinkiang during the First Opium War, 1842. Illustration from Thomas Allom and George Newenham Wright, *The Chinese Empire Illustrated*, Vol. II, 1858.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- p. 42. Ticket allowing a Jewish passenger to ride the tram, Bombay. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
- p. 44. Sassoon & Company house, Foochow, photograph, c. 1870s. (Photo: Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institute)
- p. 48. Sans Souci decorated for the entertainment given to Lord Elphinstone. Engraving from the *Illustrated London News*, 1859. (Photo: Artokoloro/Alamy)
- p. 50. David with his sons Elias, Abdallah and S.D., c. 1857. (Illustration from Stanley Jackson, *The Sassoons*, Heinemann, 1968)
- p. 52. Ashley Park. Photograph, late nineteenth century. (Reproduced with permission from the Sassoon Family Album, *Ashley Park*)
- p. 67. The Sassoon Hospital at Pune. Engraving from the *Illustrated London News*, 1868. (Photo: by courtesy of Edwina Sassoon)
- p. 70. View of Pune from the tower of the Ohel David Synagogue looking north-west. Photograph, c. 1870. (Photo: Royal Collection Trust / copyright © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2021)
- p. 75. Statue of David Sassoon, 1865, by Thomas Woolner, in the David Sassoon Library, Mumbai. (Photo: Helen Jackson)
- p. 95. Shipping at Port Said on the Suez Canal. Photograph, late nineteenth century. (Photo: Pump Park Vintage/Alamy).
- p. 96. Visit of the Viceroy of India to the Sassoon Dock at Bombay. Engraving from the *Illustrated London News*, 1875. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
- p. 99. Garden Reach, Pune. Photograph, c. 1870. (Photo: by courtesy of Edwina Sassoon)
- p. 101. Abdallah Sassoon's bungalow, Mahabaleshwar, Western Ghats. (Photo: Agoda.com)
- p. 112. Presentation of the Freedom of the City to Albert Sassoon at the Guildhall, London. Engraving from *The Graphic*, 1873. (Photo: Shutterstock)
- p. 114. Gold casket presented to sir Albert David Sassoon by the City of London. Engraving from the *Illustrated London News*, 1873.
- p. 116. Visit of the Prince of Wales to Sans Souci, Bombay. Engraving from the *Illustrated London News*, 1876. (Photo: Dinodia / Alamy)
- p. 117. Unveiling of the statue of the Prince of Wales presented to the City of Bombay by Sir Albert Sassoon. Engraving from *The Graphic*, 1879. (Photo: Artokoloro / Alamy)
- p. 120. Albert Sassoon. Photograph, late nineteenth century. (Reproduced with permission from the Sassoon Family Album, *Ashley Park*)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- p. 129. Communiqué from the Hong Kong branch of David Sassoon & Co., January 1874. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
- p. 131. Eugenie Louise Sassoon (*née* Perugia). Photograph by Cyril Flower, 1st Baron Battersea, 1890s. (Photo: copyright © National Portrait Gallery, London)
- p. 133. Reuben Sassoon's house, Brighton. Photograph, 1896. (Photo: Royal Collection Trust / copyright © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2021)
- p. 140. Joseph, S.D.'s son, at Ashley Park. Photograph, late nineteenth century. (Reproduced with permission from the Sassoon Family Album, *Ashley Park*)
- p. 143. The Sassoon family coat of arms.
- p. 149. Group photograph of Edward and Aline Sassoon at their Scottish estate with members of the Marlborough Set. Photograph, c. 1895. (Photo: reproduced with the permission of the Trustees of the Rothschild Archive London)
- p. 150. Arthur Sassoon and Reuben Sassoon in costume for a fancy-dress ball. Photographs by Lafayette, 1897. (Photos: copyright © National Portrait Gallery, London)
- p. 152–3. Letter from the Duke of York to Reuben Sassoon, 9 September 1900. (Photo: by courtesy of Joanna Sassoon)
- p. 154. The Shah and international royalty at the Empire Theatre, London, for Albert Sassoon's Ballet Entertainment. Engraving from the *Illustrated London News*, 1889. (Photo: Look and Learn / Bridgeman Images)
- p. 178. Farha Sassoon and her daughter Rachel. Photograph by Major Stanley Smith, 1902. (Photo: Archive of Mordecai Wolff Haffkine, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem. Reproduced by permission)
- p. 193. The Sassoon family mausoleum, Brighton. Photograph, 1953. (Photo: Shutterstock)
- p. 198. Rachel Beer (*née* Sassoon). Photograph by H. Walter Barnett, 1900–1903. (Photo: copyright © National Portrait Gallery, London)
- p. 203. Record registering 'nil' exports of opium, 1911. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
- p. 206. *A National Anti-Opium Sunday: Some 'Pros.' and 'Cons.'*, pamphlet issued by the Anti-Opium Lobby, January 1908. (Photo: Church of England Archives, Lambeth Palace Library)
- p. 208. Share certificate for one of E. D. Sassoon's mills in Bombay, issued 1921. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
- p. 210. Louise Sassoon's invitation to the funeral of Edward VII, May 1910. (Photo: Reproduced with the permission of the Trustees of the Rothschild Archive)

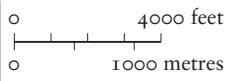
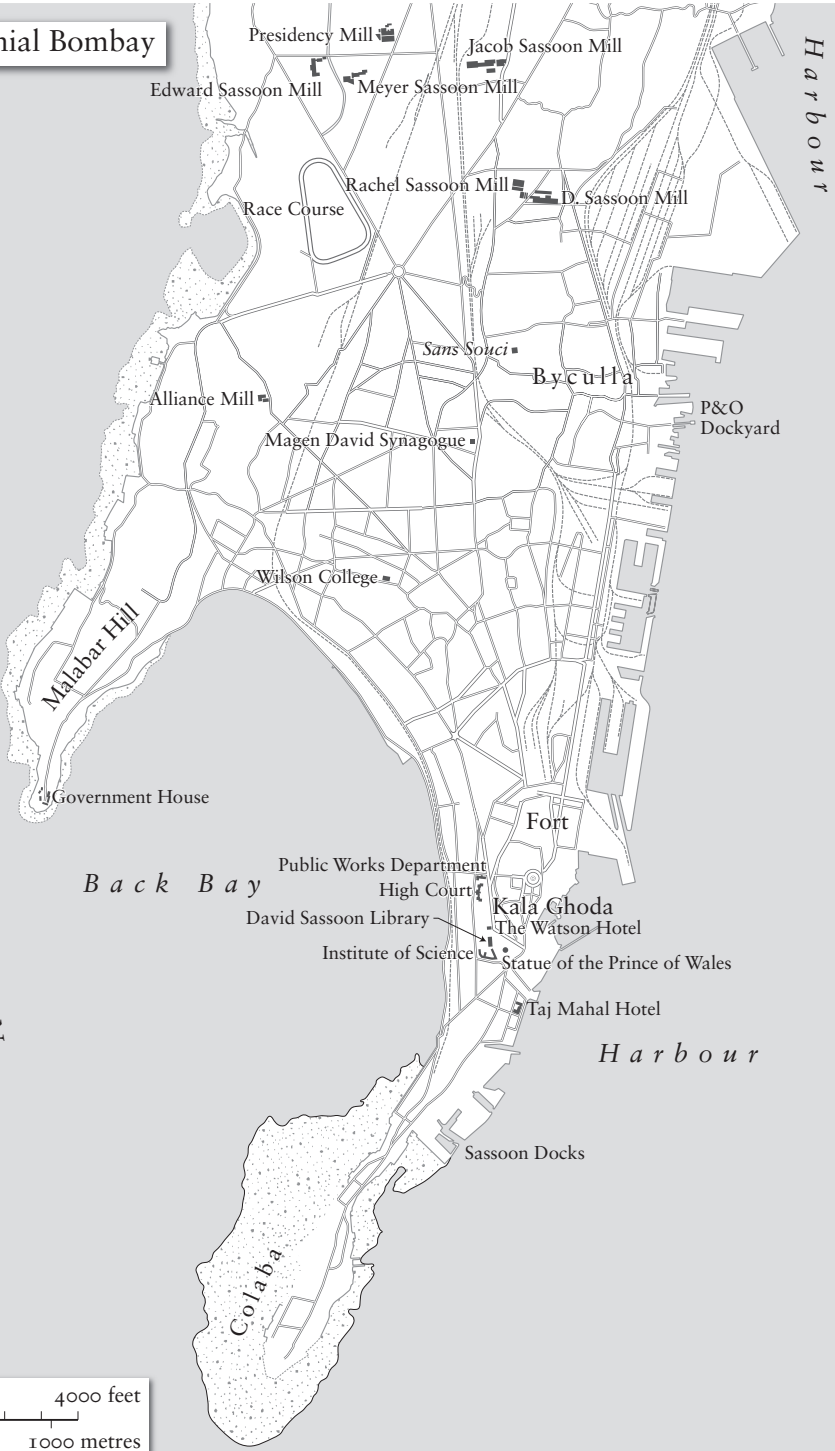
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- p. 234. The Japanese morning room in Edward and Aline Sassoon's house, 46 Grosvenor Place, London, 1896. (Photo: the Bedford Lemere Collection / Historic England)
- p. 237. Philip Sassoon's house, 25 Park Lane, London, 1918. (Photo: TopFoto)
- p. 238. Interior at 25 Park Lane, 1922. (Photo: Mary Evans Picture Library)
- p. 240. *Sir Philip Sassoon in Strange Company*. Cartoon by Max Beerbohm from *A Survey*, Heinemann, 1921. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
- p. 241. Philip Sassoon on tour as Under-Secretary of State for Air, 1928. (Photo: Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins)
- p. 253. Seating plan for a dinner pasted into Victor Sassoon's diary, 13 September 1927. (Photo: Sassoon Papers and Photographs, DeGolyer Library, SMU)
- p. 258. Sassoon House under construction, Shanghai. Photograph, 1920s. (Photo: British Steel Collection, #2328. Reproduced with the permission of Teesside Archives)
- p. 260. Business card for Victor Sassoon's night-club, *Ciro's*, Shanghai, c. 1945. (Photo: private collection)
- p. 266. News clipping from the *Boston Globe* pasted into Victor Sassoon's diary, 22 April 1942. (Photo: Sassoon Papers and Photographs, DeGolyer Library, SMU)
- p. 271. Chinese civilians with Japanese soldiers at a checkpoint. Photograph by Victor Sassoon, 1937. (Photo: Sassoon Papers and Photographs, DeGolyer Library, SMU)
- p. 288. Victor Sassoon with one of his horses at a race meeting, 1953. (Photo: Sassoon Papers and Photographs, DeGolyer Library, SMU)

# Colonial Bombay



I  
N  
D  
I  
A  
N  
O  
C  
E  
A  
N



# Shanghai in the 1930s



Ohel Rachel  
Synagogue

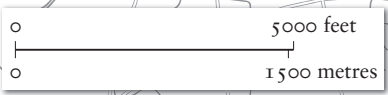
Shanghai  
Jewish  
School

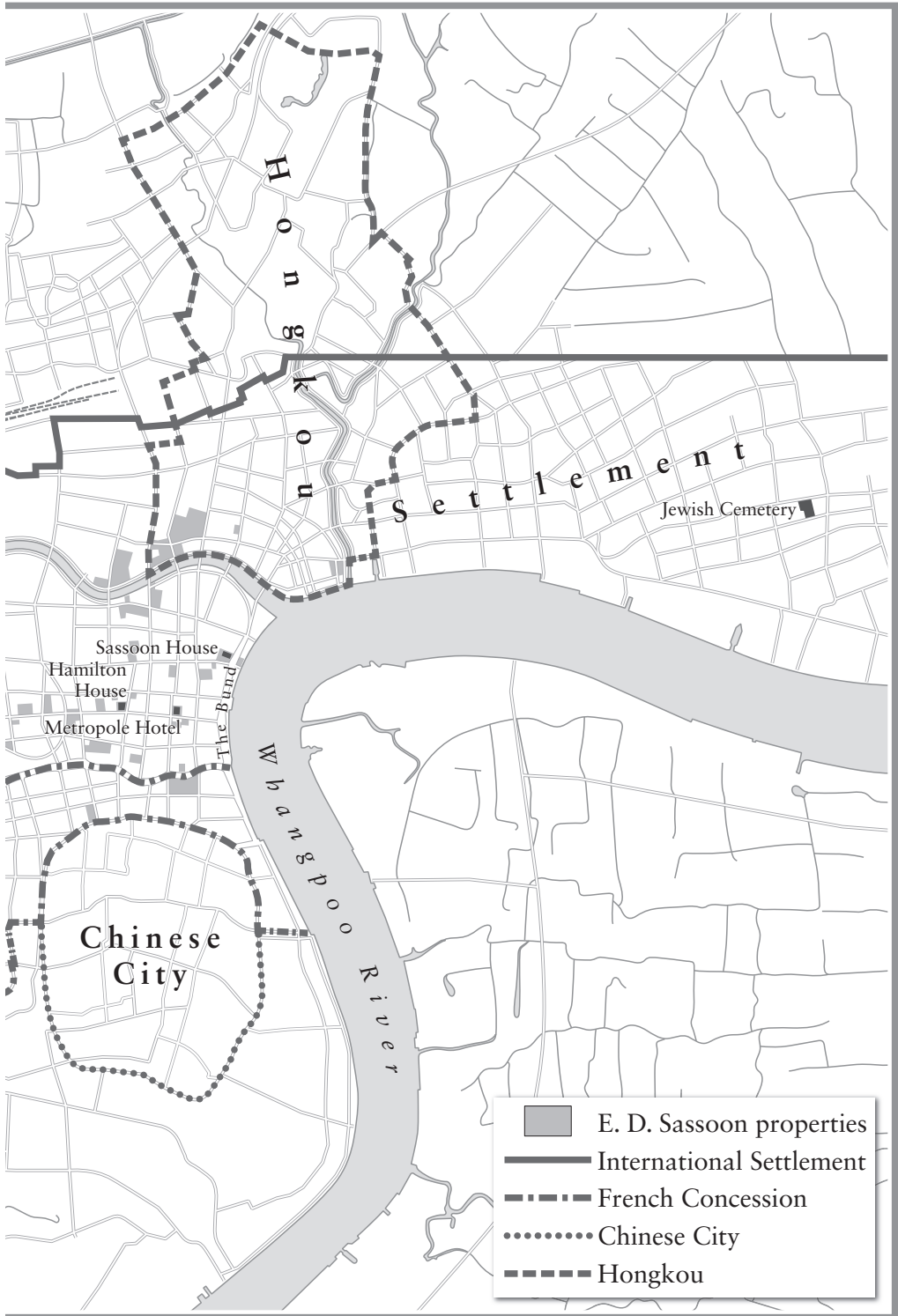
I n t e r n a t i o n a l

Jewish Cemetery

Race  
Club

F r e n c h C o n c e s s i o n





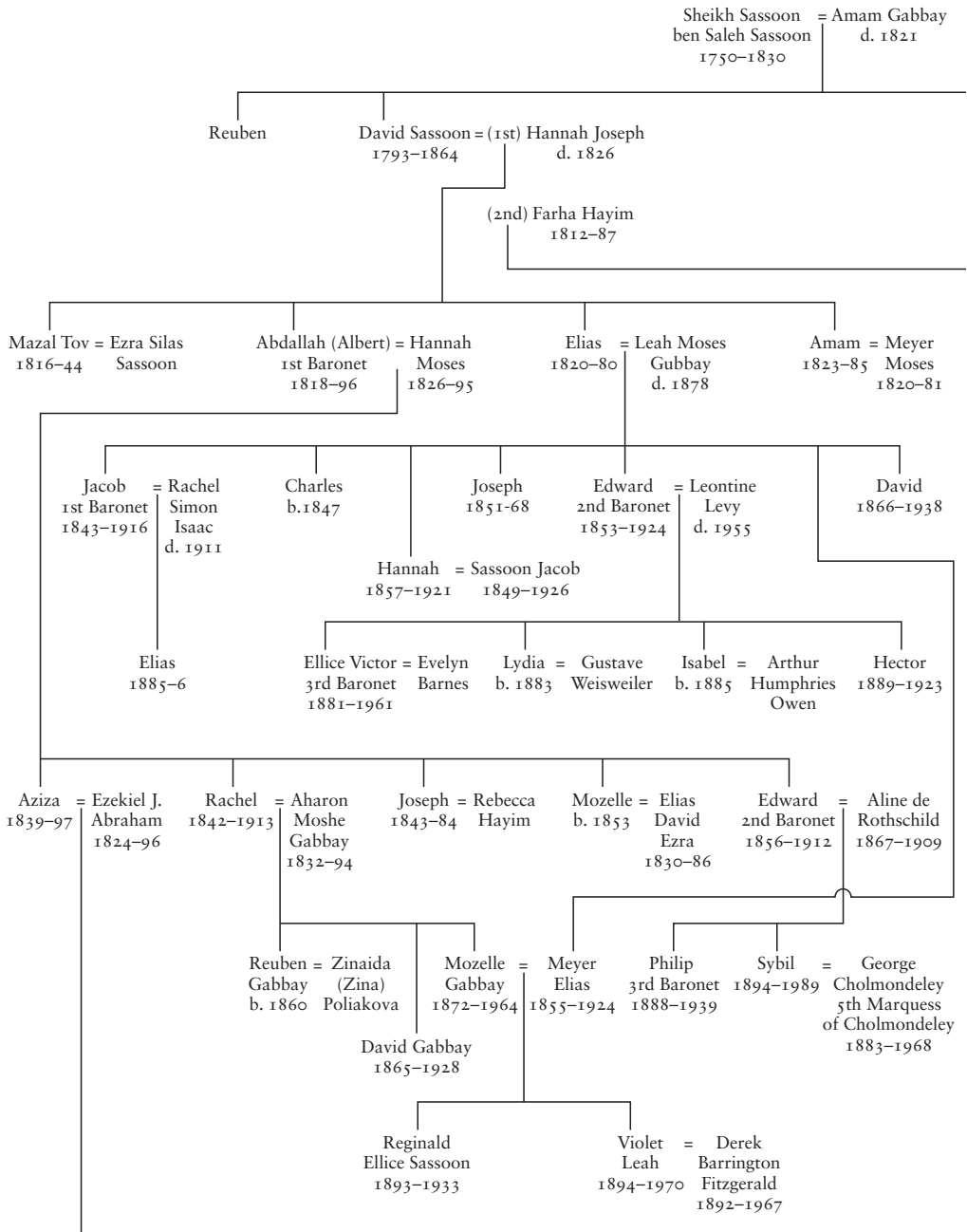


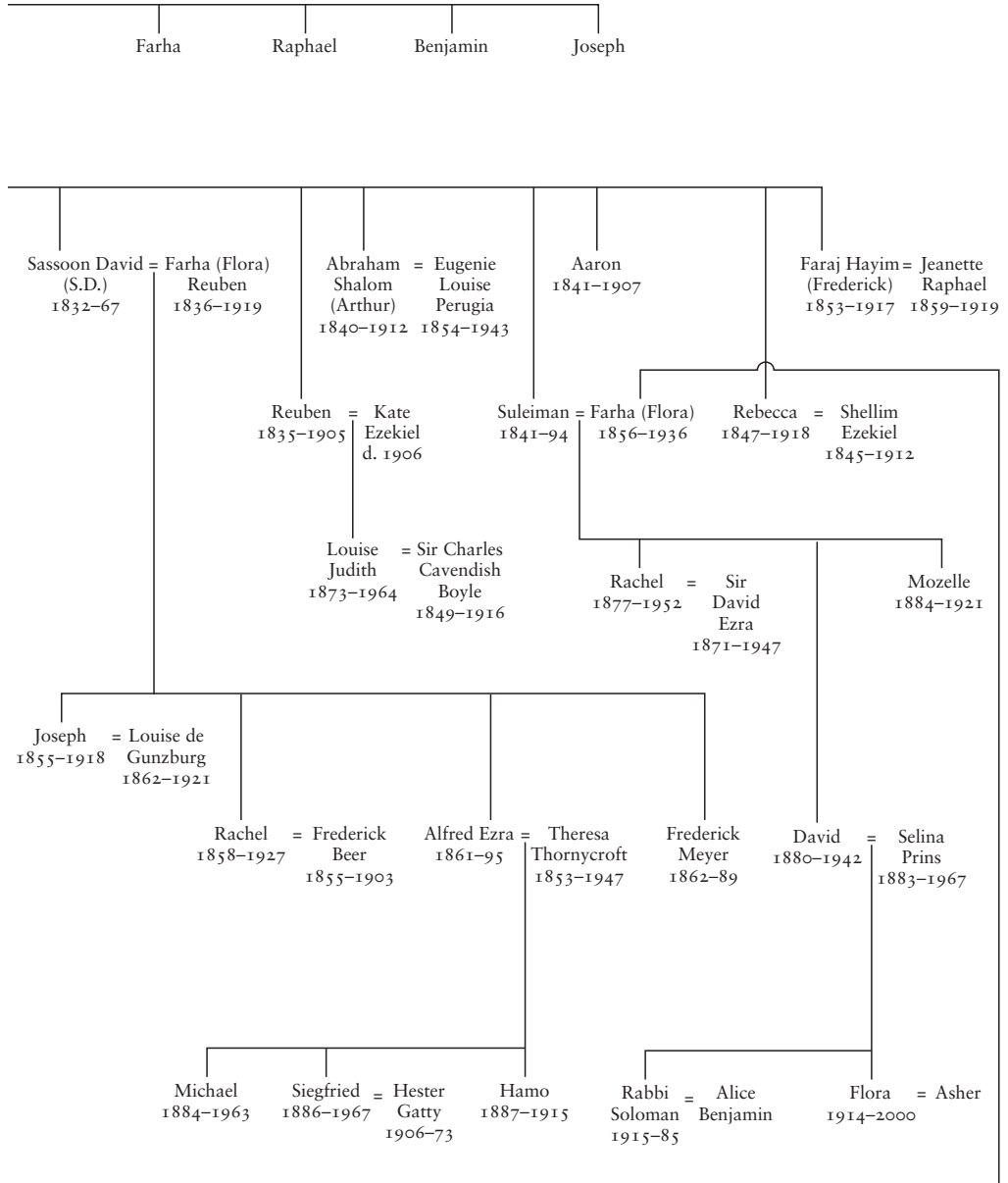
# The World of the Sassoons





# The Sassoons (principal figures)







## *Preface*

It all began with a letter. Returning to my office from lunch one day during a fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, in early 2012, I was greeted by a handwritten letter addressed to me on my desk, where it had been deposited by the college porter. The return address on the back of the envelope identified the sender as one Joseph Sassoon of Kirkcudbright, Scotland. I had never heard of the town and assumed it was a joke or a mistake of some kind. When I finally opened the letter, however, I found that its author was as described. My namesake had read an article of mine about authoritarian regimes in *Le Monde diplomatique*. He thought it interesting enough, but what prompted him to write was our shared surname. He declared himself a descendant of Sheikh Sassoon ben Saleh Sassoon and believed I might be also, and therefore hoped to hear from me.

I had never been much interested in the history of the Sassoon family. As a child in Baghdad, I had ignored my father whenever he attempted to educate me about my illustrious forebears, going so far as to literally close my ears to annoy him. Later, when I had embarked on this project, there were many occasions when I wanted nothing more than to hear his tales and ask him a few questions for just a few minutes, but sadly the wish came two decades too late. All this is to say that the letter remained unanswered on my desk until my partner Helen heard about it, chastised me for my rudeness and told me to write back. I did and suggested to this other Joseph Sassoon that we talk on the telephone, only to be mortified two days later when the porter proudly informed me that he had blocked what he thought was a prank phone call for me from a 'Joseph Sassoon'. When I at last managed to speak to Joseph in Scotland, he told me about his father,

the first cousin of the poet Siegfried Sassoon, and his grandfather, the husband of a prominent Gunzburg from Russia. Without his encouragement, I doubt that this project would have taken off.

It was a subject with no relation to the book I had just finished, about the archives of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party, or the one that had brought me to Oxford, a comparative study of authoritarian systems in the Arab republics, but my appetite was whetted. I visited the National Archives at Kew and the British Library in London to read about the family, and travelled to Scotland to meet Joseph (known as Joey). He shared with me what he knew, and the trove of pictures that had been passed down to him. He also referred me to Sybil Sassoon, another family historian and the creator of a comprehensive family tree, stretching back to 1830, that would prove immensely helpful – not least in distinguishing between other namesakes (unhelpfully for the researcher, the family favoured just a few forenames, which recur within and across generations) and following individuals as they crossed continents in the age of empire, adapting their names as necessary.

I had no idea where these initial excursions would lead. Unlike Sybil, I was born too late to know any of the cast of this book, even the protagonists of the mid-twentieth century. And although I am descended from Sheikh Sassoon, as Joseph hoped, he was the last ancestor we shared. When he fled Baghdad in 1830, fearing the wrath of the authorities, to join his oldest son, his other children remained in Baghdad. Some left Iraq later, but my ancestors stayed put until we too were forced to escape, for reasons similar to those of Sheikh Sassoon. After the Six Day War in June 1967, life for the country's Jews grew increasingly untenable. The rise of the Ba'ath Party a year later exacerbated the situation, and public hangings of Jews followed in 1969. When we finally managed to escape a couple of years later, we left with nothing except for a small bag, closing the door not only on our property but on a land where my family had lived for centuries. This book is thus intended to be not a family history but the history of a family, specifically a branch with which I can claim a connection but of which I am not, in the end, a member.

For me as a historian, what really tipped the balance was the discovery of a trove of untapped archival material. Sometime after reading slipped imperceptibly into research, I went to the National Library in Jerusalem,

## PREFACE

where most of the family's archives are held. They contain thousands of documents dating from 1855 to 1949: everything from personal letters to account books and menus for dinner parties, seemingly every scrap of paper kept. The letters between family members tended to follow a similar structure: formal at the beginning and end of the letters; in the middle jumping from one subject to another; and often containing stinging criticism if trades had not been profitable or if one member of the family purchased a commodity at a price that another member considered too high. Most of this business correspondence was written in Baghdadi-Jewish dialect to prevent outsiders from reading their letters; family members used their Baghdadi-Jewish but wrote it in Hebrew characters (some refer to the language as Judeo-Arabic but this is a relatively new term). The result is indecipherable to all but a few scholars, but fortunately I am fluent in Arabic, Hebrew and the Baghdadi-Jewish dialect. Writing this book, I felt sometimes as if the historian in me, the migrant and the Baghdadi Jew were all jockeying for position. My hope is that, in the end, they coalesced and did not hinder me from investigating the history in an objective and unemotional manner.

Research in other archives, in London, Delhi, Dallas, Shanghai and Istanbul, followed and, with the assistance of some wonderful archivists and researchers, I found much fascinating material produced by and about the family. Some years fell between archives, and for those I relied upon newspapers from China, India, England, the US and the Bahamas, and official documents of the relevant councils and chambers of commerce to fill in the gaps. The material grew vast – appropriately, given that the Sassoons straddled three empires: that of their adoptive home, Britain, and those of the two commodities whose trade they came to dominate, cotton and opium. Their legacy lay not only in dusty boxes in darkened storage rooms, however. Following the advice of Robert Caro, the great biographer of Lyndon Johnson, for historians to obtain a 'sense of place',<sup>1</sup> I travelled to the Sassoons' former residences in Mumbai, Pune and the hill station of Mahabaleshwar, the synagogues they built in India and China, their headquarters in Shanghai, their estates in England, even their graves.

The geographical spread is telling. The Sassoons traded with members of seemingly every religion and sect around the globe, travelling



extensively not only for business but to explore new horizons, and they felt at home wherever they settled, despite being a tiny minority in terms of both their religion and their migrant status. They were not unique in their time in amassing several fortunes and rising to the upper echelons of society. But unlike their more famous contemporaries, the Rothschilds and Vanderbilts, they bridged East and West. Their story is accordingly not just that of an Arab-Jewish family who settled in India, traded in China and aspired to be British, but also a vista into the world in which they lived and prospered as well as its major developments – from the American Civil War to the opium wars, the opening of the Suez Canal and introduction of the telegraph, as well as the mechanization of textile production. The era they inhabited was driven above all by an encompassing globalization, which they and other merchant families benefited from and influenced, and which shaped our world today.

Unlike our fragmented world today, the Sassoons did not care about the ethnicity or religion of their counterparts; all they really cared about was one thing and one thing only: could they trust them? This was not because they did not adhere to Judaism's strict rules and traditions but because trust and reputation were the predominant characteristics of what differentiated successful traders from others in a world where letters took three to five weeks to reach their destinations, and even when the telegraph started, telegrams were expensive and traders were wary that their messages could be read by anyone. The Sassoons had relationships with traders across the world: from India to China to Persia to the Ottoman Empire, to Africa and Britain.

The Sassoons epitomized the way in which migration can influence different regions of the world. With their acumen and hard work, the founder and then the next two generations managed not only to enrich themselves but to contribute to the cities they were living in and to their communities. The Sassoons lived in three main hubs: Bombay, then Shanghai and finally London. Their landmarks in those cities are still around today, particularly in Bombay (throughout the book, I use the city's old name rather than Mumbai).

I begin in Ottoman Baghdad before the Sheikh's departure, and move with his son David Sassoon to Bombay, where he gradually built his business. Family was of immense importance to David, and

he was blessed with one that was large by any standard. The book therefore necessarily focuses on the members who played leading roles in taking his business to its mercantile pinnacle, a truly global business distributed around the ports and cities of Asia, Europe and the Middle East, trading not only cotton and opium, but almost every major commodity from tea and silk to spices and pearls, with a network of contacts and informants which was the envy of traders everywhere. Six personalities successively take centre stage: David, the dynasty's founder; his sons Abdallah (later Albert), who would succeed him on his death, Elias, who developed the business in China before setting off to create a rival one, and Suleiman, who managed the business in Asia after Albert's attention was dragged to the West; Suleiman's wife, Farha (later Flora), who took charge after his death and was, I believe, the first woman to run a global business in the nineteenth century; and finally Victor, who presided over the business in its last twenty-five years. They are joined by other Sassoons, not least the war-poet Siegfried, the politician and art collector Philip, and the first woman in Britain to be named editor at a national newspaper, Rachel Beer.

Less attractive to our eyes is the family's involvement with one commodity that played a critical part in their success: opium. I have tried to understand this in its context, in light of the way the drug was perceived in their time, and to avoid passing moral judgement. I show instead how they came to control a large portion of the opium trade between India and China, how they ignored the winds of change around the world as its devastating effects became widely known, and how they used their political clout in Britain to delay prohibition.

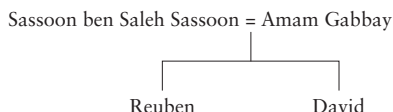
This book traces not only the rise of the Sassoons but also their decline: why it happened, how the economic and political world order which had fostered their ascent began to change after the First World War, and how the realization of their aspirations to join the ranks of the British aristocracy drew their attention away from their business and prevented them from adapting to these new circumstances, leading to the winding up of their companies after the Second World War. In the annals of family histories, there are many such stories of incredible fortunes made and squandered over the course of three generations. None is more famous than *Buddenbrooks*, Thomas Mann's

## PREFACE

first novel. In it he charts with almost documentary precision the decline of a bourgeois family of German grain merchants over four generations in the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The Sassoons lacked the Buddenbrooks' deep Hanseatic roots, however. As migrants, they had to establish themselves somewhere and ally themselves with some country. They chose Britain, the dominant world power at this book's beginning but not at its end, and thus needed and wanted, probably more than anything else, to be accepted as English. They found success – Sassoons who had been born in Baghdad joined the English upper classes, befriending even royalty – but it was a metamorphosis as fatal to their fortunes as any misjudgement in Mann's novel.

# I

## Baghdad Beginnings, 1802–30



In 1824 a rabbi by the name of David D'Beth Hillel set out from his native Lithuania on an epic journey that took him halfway around the world. He travelled through Palestine, Syria, Arabia, Kurdistan and Persia, halting his expedition in Madras, India, where he took out an advertisement to announce the book he had written about his encounters, 'an account of the manners and customs of the places which he has visited . . . with a vocabulary of words most useful for travellers in five languages, viz., Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Hindustani, and English.'<sup>1</sup> Wherever he went, he attempted to describe the distinctive beliefs and culture of the people he met and to identify the connections of Jews resident in all these countries to the old traditions. He spent a whole year in Baghdad, the principal city in the vast, fertile plains of Mesopotamia, the 'Land between the Rivers' – the Tigris and Euphrates – and vividly depicted life there:

The modern Baghdad is a very large town. The Tigris passes through the midst of it and on it is a very large bridge built on small boats. The whole town is built of bricks . . . The nobility, the Israelites [a term used for Jews], and the Christians all reside in this [Persian] part. The streets and markets are narrow; the town has a very rude appearance; but the nobles' houses are finely painted inside.<sup>2</sup>

The city the rabbi visited had been founded a thousand years earlier, under the Abbasid Caliphate in the eighth century. For the next five centuries Baghdad prospered, becoming the cultural, commercial and intellectual centre of the Islamic world during its Golden Age. Its reputation for ‘genius, enterprise, and learning’ remained unsurpassed; as another visitor in the nineteenth century put it, ‘the burning light of its philosophers shone, when all around elsewhere was dark as any within the history of man’.<sup>3</sup>

In 1534, however, the Ottomans captured Mesopotamia, turning it into the *wilaya*, or province, of Baghdad. The incessant conflicts between the Persians and Ottomans that followed, stemming in part from the rivalry between the Ottoman rulers and Persian Safavids, who couldn’t accept Sunni control of the city, tipped it into decline.<sup>4</sup> The Ottomans brought with them Mamluks from Georgia as administrators. The word Mamluk means ‘owned’, and they were not Arabs, but freed slave soldiers, mostly from the Caucasus, who had converted to Islam after the Ottomans conquered Egypt, Syria and the Hejaz early in the sixteenth century. They proved able custodians and gradually came to exert more and more power until the middle of the eighteenth century, when they effectively usurped it. From 1747 until 1831, the majority of Baghdad’s governors were Mamluks, ruling independently of the Ottoman Empire of which the province technically remained a part. Government during this Mamluk period was concentrated around the Pasha – equivalent to a regional governor – and tended to mirror the strength or weakness of the incumbent. Perhaps the greatest of the Mamluk rulers was Suleiman, who ruled Baghdad between 1780 and 1802. His death that year saw Baghdad return to instability and strife: for the next three decades, Pashas came and went, each subject to the plots and assassination attempts of their rivals and, sometimes, their successors. The local population suffered increasingly from food shortages, and bouts of looting in many parts of the city were rife.

Jews had been a continuous presence in Mesopotamia for some 2,500 years, since the forced exile in the sixth century BC following the conquest of Judaea by the Babylonians. The community, which came to be known as the Babylonian Jewry, possessed its own language, called Baghdadi-Jewish, a dialect of Arabic written in Hebrew



Ottoman Baghdad in the nineteenth century

letters. There were thriving Jewish communities in all cities in the province, and there were most likely more Jews there than anywhere else in the Arab East.<sup>5</sup> According to Rabbi Hillel, there were about 6,000 Jewish families and five large synagogues in Baghdad at the time of his visit. A later traveller estimated 7,000 out of a total of 50,000 and noted the prominent role Jews played in the province: ‘the commerce, and even the government, fall into the hands of a few Jews and Armenians’.<sup>6</sup> Jews typically were, with Armenians and Persians, the major merchants and bankers of the Islamic territories. The most important of these were not only in their (various) home provinces but in the Ottoman capital: one Ezekiel Gabbay, an important Baghdadi banker, was even appointed *sarraf bashi* (chief treasurer) at the court in Constantinople, where he became one of Sultan Mahmud II’s favourite advisers as a reward for helping the Sultan deal with an especially troublesome Pasha in 1811. He went on to develop a lucrative business selling senior administrators’ posts around the empire, and there were tales of occasions when ‘as many as fifty or sixty Pashas crowded the antechamber of this high-standing Jew’ to appeal for his support for their appointment or reconfirmation.<sup>7</sup> Many honours were bestowed on him, and his brother was appointed *sarraf bashi* in Baghdad.<sup>8</sup>

Ezekiel and his brother both came from a class of wealthy Jews who handled the finances of, and lent money to, local rulers in

provinces across the Ottoman Empire. Such Jews were of particular interest to Rabbi Hillel:

The treasurer of the pasha is an Israelite who rules over [the Jewish community]. The common Jews call him the 'King of Israel,' and he has great power to punish them by money or stripes, according to his wish, even when not lawful. In ancient times it was required here that the treasurer of the pasha should be [of] the seed of David, and it was an inheritance from the father to son.<sup>9</sup>

During the Mamluk period, the chief treasurer was chosen from the Jewish community by the Pasha, as most of the mercantile class was Jewish. He was known as the *nasi* (Hebrew for president) and was the community's representative to both the local and the imperial administrations. It was a position at least equal to the religious head of the communities, known as the chief rabbi, and the holder's influence extended to other Jewish communities outside the province of Baghdad, to those in Persia or Yemen.<sup>10</sup> This system of two heads, lay and spiritual, lasted until 1864, when the Ottomans appointed a single leader, known as the *hakham bashi* (chief rabbi), to be responsible for the community's affairs.<sup>11</sup> Such privileges came with responsibilities: the chief treasurer was expected to donate generously to charitable causes, including religious ones, and to support his co-religionists. One gentile traveller to Baghdad claimed that there were no Jewish beggars: 'If one of their class fall into distress, another more wealthy relieves him.'<sup>12</sup> The relationship between the *wali* (governor) or the Pasha and their treasurer was necessarily close but also potentially volatile, and if it soured, treasurers were liable to be imprisoned or even killed. The political backbiting between Constantinople and the provincial administration was unrelenting; each centre of power schemed endlessly to extend its influence over the other and ensure that key appointments in both courts were held by people it trusted. The treasurer needed strong connections with the Sultan's court in Constantinople, but not so strong as to make the *wali* feel threatened. This delicate balancing act was, as Rabbi Hillel reported, passed from father to son for more than a hundred years, but by the nineteenth century it was increasingly 'won in competition with other Jews and this resulted in money being paid for this honour and even in Jews

having their competitors killed or discredited'.<sup>13</sup> Realpolitik had in fact long played a role in appointments, but turnover certainly increased after the eighteenth century and political instability invited a new ruthlessness: during the year the rabbi spent in Baghdad two holders of the office were murdered by competitors, who then succeeded their victims.

Even before Sheikh Sassoon ben Saleh Sassoon was appointed by the Sultan's *firman* (decree) chief treasurer, and thus lay head of the Baghdad Jewish community, in 1781, soon after Suleiman the Great acquired the Pashalik, there were reports that individuals in Baghdad's administration intended him harm. Born in 1750, Sassoon made his name by marrying into one of Baghdad's most prominent Jewish families. The union produced six sons and one daughter, and, in accordance with the Arab custom of renaming the parents after their oldest son, Sassoon was known as Abu Reuben (father of Reuben; his wife would have been Um Reuben). Little is known about Reuben except that he died of a disease in 1802, but the name remained and for generations to come the family would be called 'Beit Abu Reuben' (the house of Abu Reuben). David, Sassoon's second son, who had been born in 1793, assumed the role of heir to the business and, potentially, his father's office. He grew up in the shadow of the most eminent Jew in Baghdad, the 'head of [the] community and president of a generation'.<sup>14</sup> Sassoon was known for his close relations with the Pasha and, indirectly, the Sultan, extolled by one poet as 'one of the most honest and just presidents who worked hard for his people and community'.<sup>15</sup> In 1808, he arranged for David, aged fifteen, to marry the fourteen-year-old Hannah, from an affluent Jewish family from Basra, in the south of the province. (The union would grant him his first grandson, Abdallah, in 1818, and then another, Elias, as well as two granddaughters, Mazal Tov and Amam.) Sassoon was by this time one of the longest-serving *sarraf bashi* in the city's history, having remained in his post not only through Suleiman Pasha's reign, the last two decades of the eighteenth century, 'the golden era of the Mamluk Dynasty in Baghdad',<sup>16</sup> but also for the tenure of his successor, and his successor's successor. But by late 1816, thirty-five years after his appointment, clouds were gathering.

The Ottomans under Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808-39) made their first



attempt to expel the Mamluks from Baghdad in 1810. Ottoman troops managed to kill Suleiman Pasha (son of Suleiman the Great) but ultimately failed to wrest back control of Baghdad province. In the ensuing chaos a number of Pashas tried to assert themselves over the city in quick succession, each ousted by the next. The sheer pace of events meant that some pashas effectively ruled before their formal appointment arrived in Baghdad, while for others the opposite was the case.<sup>17</sup> Sa'id Pasha was in control during the years 1813–16, but lurking in the background was an ambitious Mamluk named Dawud.<sup>18</sup> Born into slavery in Tiflis, Georgia, he was brought to Baghdad, sold and resold, converted to Islam and served in Suleiman the Great's household. The Ottoman archives paint a striking picture. A talented writer and warrior, he could be generous, enlightened and fair, but also cruel, corrupt and avaricious.<sup>19</sup> Dawud began to plot his rise early in Sa'id's reign, assisted by a Baghdadi Jew who aspired to replace Sheikh Sassoon as chief treasurer, Ezra ben Nissim Gabbay. Ezra in turn had a powerful ally in his brother Ezekiel, since 1811 the *sarraf bashi* to the Sultan in Constantinople and an influential figure throughout the Ottoman Empire – one report indicated that the Dutch vice-consul turned to him to settle a quarrel with a local governor of a district somewhere in the empire.<sup>20</sup>

After a number of skirmishes in the winter of 1816–17, Dawud finally captured Sa'id and had him executed. Shortly after Dawud came to power, a decree was duly carried to Baghdad announcing the end of Sheikh Sassoon's term and the appointment of Ezra Gabbay as the new chief treasurer.<sup>21</sup> It was a neat echo of Dawud's own confirmation and the decree announcing it, which had been carried from Constantinople by the son of the Sultan's Jewish *sarraf bashi*.<sup>22</sup>

British traders were by this time well established in Baghdad, and the East India Company had been given permission to establish residency there two decades previously. Their hopes for Dawud were initially high, but they quickly realized that his character meant Baghdad was unlikely to return to the stability of the final decades of the last century. A British political agent described him in the most villainous terms:

His dissimulation is most profound, and frequently, like his cruelty without the least apparent motive. The most solemn oaths and engagements

have not the least weight with him; his most faithful servants are by no means sure of his favour and those on whom he smiles the most, are frequently the unsuspecting subjects of his aversion. His administration has become a continued scene of rapacity, persecution and treachery.<sup>23</sup>

The British had other reasons to dislike Dawud, whose policies emulated those of Muhammad 'Ali in seeking to aim at reducing European (and Persian) influence over his country, but he was certainly capable of great capriciousness.<sup>24</sup> Even Dawud's closest ally, the *sarraf* Ezra, wasn't immune to it: in 1818 a disagreement over loans raised to support Dawud's regime led the Pasha 'in a fit of passion' to order that Ezra 'be put in irons and thrown into a Dungeon, whence he was next day liberated at the intercession' of a senior representative of the Ottomans.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, once Dawud had consolidated power and popular support he showed his real intentions and declared his decision to refrain from paying duties to the Ottoman Sultan in Constantinople. That crisis was overtaken by another, the resumption of hostilities with Persia. Troubles also flared up with Kurdish tribes after a period of relative quiet. Dawud was supported by the Sultan in his battles against the Persians and Kurds, but was unable to defeat either, and the years 1819-23 witnessed large-scale demographic dislocations in the province as his subjects fled the 'scorched-earth tactics of the Persians' and resulting famine.<sup>26</sup> In late 1823 Dawud negotiated a truce, but this raised suspicions in Constantinople, and the Ottoman regime again began to ponder ending the autonomous state of the Mamluks.

Once Dawud Pasha became governor, the problems confronting Sheikh Sassoon became insurmountable. Dawud did not see Sheikh Sassoon as an ally and was worried about his strong relationship with Constantinople. The thirteen years between the resignation of Sheikh Sassoon from his job and his family fleeing Baghdad are important in understanding the context of their departure from their beloved homeland. Dawud's relationship with the Jewish community in Baghdad was somewhat complicated. On one hand, he had gained his position with the help of Jewish influence with the Sultan; on the other hand, he soon developed a reputation for oppressing the Jews. In reality, greed was his main motive as he attempted to amass as much wealth as possible.<sup>27</sup>

Under pressure to send money to Constantinople, Dawud turned to the Jews for loans. When some of Baghdad's wealthiest merchants refused, he had them arrested and demanded payment from their families on pain of death.<sup>28</sup> He was aided in this scheme by his teacher, a man nicknamed 'the informer' by the Jewish community, and an 'apostate Jew' who had converted to Islam after becoming infatuated with a Muslim dancer and who provided Dawud with the information he needed to extort large sums of money. Between them, 'this wicked triumvirate thus brought great misfortune and many hardships on the Baghdad Jews', who as a result began to emigrate to 'distant parts where the hands of Dawud could not reach them'.<sup>29</sup> It was the beginning of the dissipation of Baghdad's Jewish community as families set out across Asia, to Aleppo, Damascus and Alexandria, and as far away as Australia.

The tensions which provoked this centrifugal movement grew more acute in 1826, when the Sultan, concluding that the Mamluks were a reactionary force blocking his reforms, announced the abolition of their army, forcing Dawud to raise even more money to pay his troops while still accommodating Constantinople. He turned on his most loyal supporter, imprisoning Ezra as he had eight years earlier, in the hope of extracting more assets from his family. This time, however, intercession from Constantinople was either not forthcoming or went unheeded. Unable to face life in prison, Ezra promptly died, paying 'with his life for all the goodness he has shown to the Pasha'.<sup>30</sup>

Our main source for Ezra's downfall is in fact another of Sheikh Sassoon's descendants, an archivist and historian named David Solomon Sassoon, who in the 1940s wrote the first reliable history of Baghdad's Jews. According to him, after Ezra's imprisonment late in the 1820s, Dawud had David Sassoon arrested in an attempt to force a ransom from his father, Sheikh Sassoon. David was in serious danger but 'escaped in a miraculous way', though details are scant. Whether David literally escaped or his freedom was bought by his father is unclear, but either as a condition of his liberation or out of the reasonable fear that he might be subject to the same ordeal again, he was to leave Baghdad immediately. After making enquiries with Major R. Taylor, a British political agent in Baghdad who reported to India and was a reliable source of information about both the Gulf and



The port of Bushir, by a British visitor in the 1830s

the subcontinent, Sheikh Sassoon specially chartered a boat to take David to Basra, where, on his father's advice, he did not linger but continued on to Bushir, about 500 miles southeast on the coast of Iran. It was sage advice, for it seems Dawud Pasha did indeed change his mind and ordered the prisoner's recapture, but by then David was out of reach. In a matter of months, Sassoon had joined him in Bushir.<sup>31</sup> The Sheikh was in his seventies and his health was deteriorating; from now David would take charge of his own future, as well as those of his four children and their stepmother, whom he had married after Hannah's death in 1826. The family had no choice but to leave – refugees rarely do – but the timing was fortunate. Violence in the province grew increasingly prevalent towards the end of the decade and its use by the regime almost systemic.<sup>32</sup> The attention of Sultan Mahmud II, which had been diverted by the war in Greece (the first independent country to be carved out of the sprawling Ottoman Empire) and several with Russia, turned to Baghdad and the intolerable independence of the Mamluks. In the aftermath of a humiliating defeat at Russian hands in 1829, the Sultan dispatched an envoy, Sadiq Effendi, to relieve Dawud of his position and replace him with a new, non-Mamluk governor.

The Pasha cordially received the envoy before learning of his dismissal, and when his pleas for time to make entreaties to the Sultan were rejected,<sup>33</sup> ‘danger was balanced against danger, fear with fear: without haste or panic the formal ambassador of the Sultan was sentenced to death by murder’.<sup>34</sup> The assassination was meticulously organized: Dawud waited outside the chamber while it took place and entered after the deed to verify Sadiq’s death. He initially sought to conceal the crime from the public and pretended that the envoy was only sick, but word was out by nightfall.<sup>35</sup> News spread swiftly, and food prices rose the next day in anticipation of the Sultan’s response to this insult. The city went into lockdown: Major Taylor reported that ‘nothing enters or leaves the City but by stealth, vegetables of any kind are not to be obtained for money’.<sup>36</sup>

In the midst of this crisis, as the Sultan prepared to dispatch an army to expel the Mamluks from Baghdad once and for all, the city was devastated by other means. The plague struck in March 1831, spreading outwards from the Jewish quarter across the city. Dawud’s tenuous control of the situation meant that no quarantines were imposed and caravans continued to travel to and from plague-infested areas, distributing the disease around the province. Normal life in the city came to a halt. Food supplies ran short, corpses piled up in the streets, law and order crumbled. At the height of the plague another disaster hit: after torrential rain that exceeded anything in living memory, the Tigris River flooded.<sup>37</sup> One English traveller, who ‘was sleeping at the top of the house’ when the river burst its banks, vividly described being ‘awakened by the roar of the waters rushing past the hall . . . No outcry accompanied the convulsions; I heard no shriek nor wail; but, as I seated myself on the upper part of the wall, I could perceive . . . the turbid waters, silently sweeping by.’<sup>38</sup> One local depicted the ensuing destruction as ‘God’s wrath on the city which was flooded on all sides while plague and death spread. No one had ever heard of such a calamity in the region.’<sup>39</sup> Another reported that ‘only a few of the Baghdad people were left at the city in the midst of death, flood and plague’.<sup>40</sup> It was estimated that more than 15,000 lives were lost, and the population of Baghdad and its afflicted districts plunged from about 150,000 to 80,000.<sup>41</sup>

The flood and epidemic signalled the end for Dawud. Many