

Preserving the “Iraqi Jewish Archive”

By Doris A. Hamburg and Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler

One of the rewards of our work at the National Archives in preserving the records of the federal government comes from learning the fascinating human stories that relate to the records.

This is the story of how the National Archives Preservation Programs staff was called upon to rescue and preserve records and books that came from the once-vibrant Iraqi Jewish community and had been damaged during the 2003 war in Iraq.

In June 2003, upon receiving an urgent request for help from the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad, the National Archives arranged for us, as two of the agency’s preservation experts, to travel to Baghdad to assess an important group of very damaged and moldy books and documents that had been rescued from the flooded basement of Saddam Hussein’s intelligence headquarters in Baghdad.

The Preservation Programs staff has extensive expertise in addressing preservation of documents

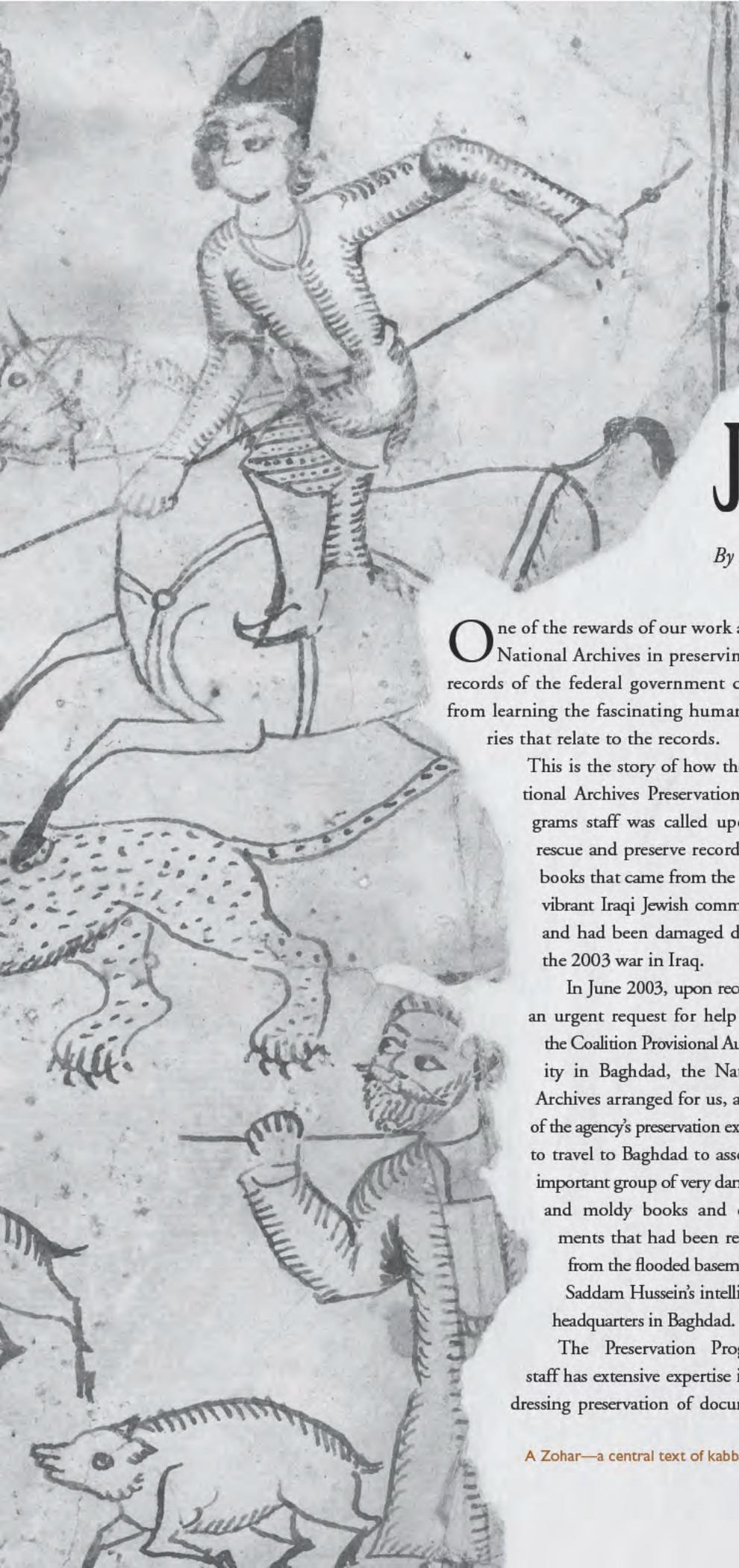
and books, including those damaged during an emergency.

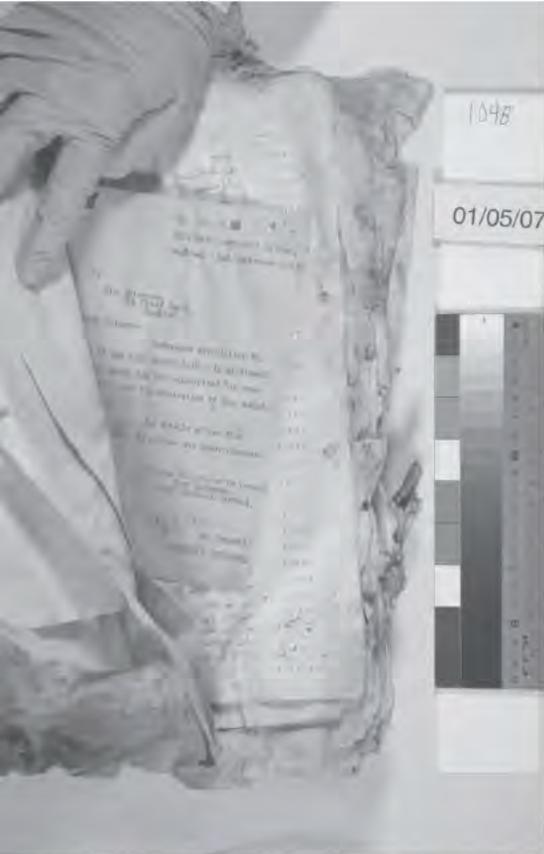
Arriving in Baghdad, Stabilizing the Records

Arriving in Baghdad via a C-130 cargo plane, the first stop for the conservation team was Saddam Hussein’s ornate Republican Guard Palace. Next, we went to a nearby warehouse on the bank of the Tigris River, where Reserve Maj. Corinne Wegener oversaw 27 metal trunks filled with the distorted, wet, and moldy books and documents, primarily in Hebrew and Arabic.

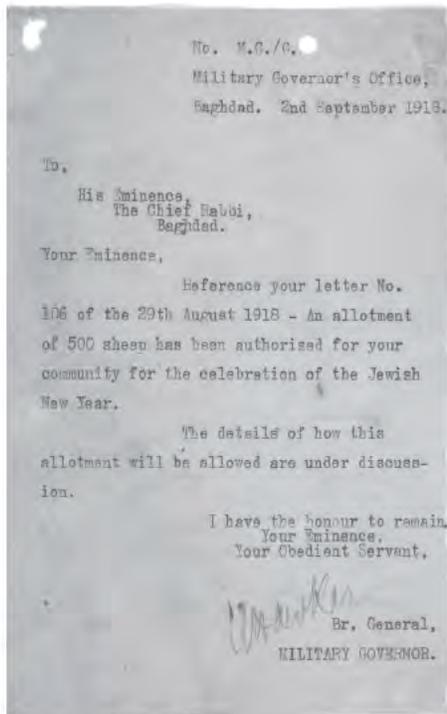
As we climbed the ladder into the freezer truck holding the trunks, we noticed that the smell of mold permeated everything. Freezing the collection had stopped further mold growth, however, and provided time to plan the next preservation steps.

Each trunk held a largely frozen mass of documents and books. While some pamphlets, books, and document files appeared to be intact and complete, many others existed as fragments with loose and missing components or covers. Overall, the collection was in moderate to poor condition. As we assessed the materials in the trunks,





A 1918 letter to the Chief Rabbi in Baghdad from the military governor before treatment (left) and after treatment (right).



The contributions of the Babylonian Jews and their Iraqi descendants influenced religious scholarship and observance, international economic development, and music and culture within the region and worldwide. Today, Iraqi Jews recall that for many years the various ethnic groups in Baghdad—Jews, Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shi'ite Muslims, Kurds, and others—lived together comfortably and respectfully as neighbors and as Iraqis.

The Iraqi Jewish Past In a Variety of Forms

The roughly 2,700 books rescued from the flooded basement date from the 16th through the 20th centuries. The Hebraica includes an eclectic mix of materials, ranging from holiday and daily prayer books to Bibles and commentaries, some fragments from scrolls, books on Jewish law, and children's Hebrew-language and Bible primers.

The Jewish books were printed in a variety of publishing centers, including Baghdad, Warsaw, Livorno, and Venice; most are from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Languages represented in the IJA include Hebrew, Arabic, and Judeo-Arabic, with a few items in English. The tens of thousands of pages of documents include both handwritten and printed items pertaining primarily to the Jewish community of Baghdad.

The Iraqi Jewish community in Baghdad, which had been as much as a third of the population of Baghdad in the first part of the 20th century, by 2003 had dwindled to about 15 people. We learned that efforts

we unofficially named the collection “Iraqi Jewish Archive” (IJA) for ease of reference.

The Jewish books and documents rescued from the intelligence headquarters are a direct link to the very rich and long history of the Jewish community that flourished for over 2,500 years in the region of Babylonia.

Discovery and Recovery Preserving Iraqi Jewish Heritage

By Gabriel Goldstein and Lisa Royse

On May 6, 2003, during the Iraq War, 16 American soldiers searching for military intelligence entered the flooded basement of the Iraqi intelligence headquarters in Baghdad.

The basement housed thousands of documents and books that were under four feet of water, including materials related to Iraq's Jewish commu-



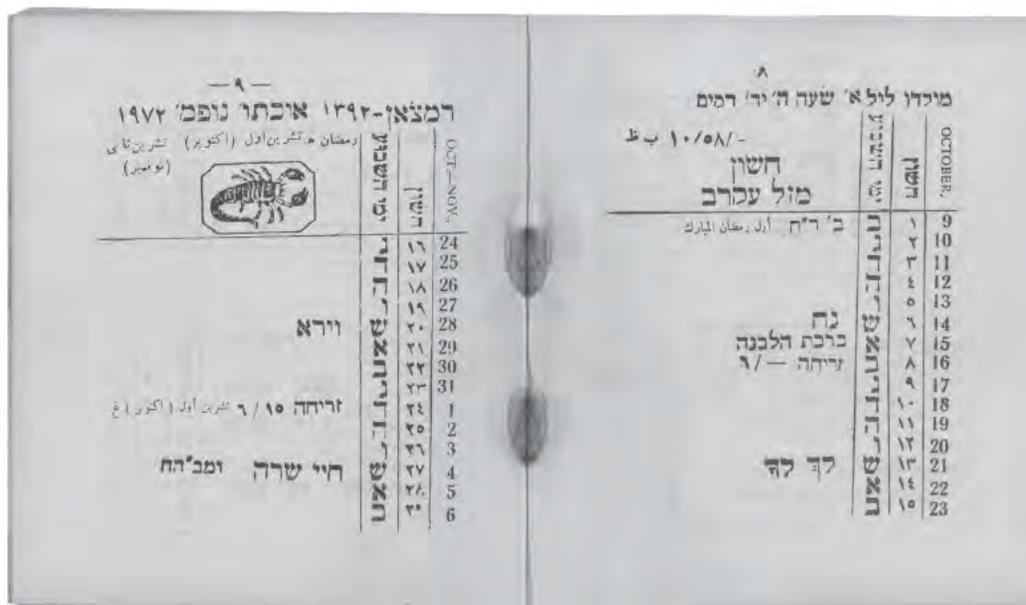
The documents are laid out to dry, May 2003

to identify members of the Jewish community who could possibly participate in the preservation of the collection had not been successful.

Maintaining the books and documents in a freezer truck was a short-term solution; at a minimum, the materials needed to be dried in order to stabilize them. Inquiries to identify alternatives for preserving the collection in Iraq or the region at that time did not yield any promising options.

In July 2003, the National Archives submitted its preservation report to Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. As a result, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) received the request to provide preservation assistance for the collection.

The preservation report proposed the steps needed to preserve the collection for future generations: vacuum freeze-drying the collection; remediating the mold so the materials could be handled; determining the intellectual content of the collection and its historical, archival, and curatorial context; determining the conservation and reformatting needs; performing conservation treatment to allow reformatting;



The 19 printed calendars found in the Intelligence headquarters basement, (date from 1959 to 1973) are among the last examples of Hebrew printed items to be produced in Baghdad.

housing the collection for proper storage and use in the future; digitizing the collection to provide access; and developing an exhibition.

The Coalition Provisional Authority and the National Archives, with the concurrence of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, entered into an agreement to ship the materials to the United States for preservation and exhibition, in the absence of local resources that could perform the work, and to return the materials to Iraq upon completion.

A Frozen Archive Arrives In America for Preservation

In late August 2003, the frozen Iraqi Jewish Archive arrived in the United States, where the National Archives assumed physical custody. With funding from the Department of State, the first phase of the preservation work began; the materials were vacuum freeze-dried at a commercial facility in Fort Worth, Texas.

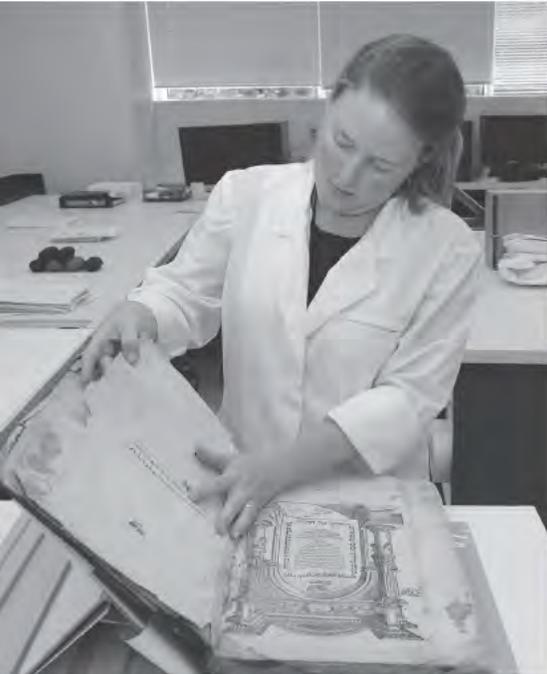
Vacuum freeze-drying allows the ice to be removed from the materials as water vapor



nity. Realizing the importance of this material, the Coalition Provisional Authority, the transitional government in Iraq, asked the National Archives and Records Administration for help.

In June 2003 the Archives sent a team of preservation experts to Baghdad. Because local options to treat and preserve the materials were limited, the books and documents were shipped, with the agreement of Iraqi representatives, to the United States

This volume of the Hebrew Bible, dating to 1568, is one of the earliest printed books discovered in the Intelligence headquarters.



A conservator inspects a volume at the National Archives.



One of the 27 metal trunks filled with wet and moldy books and documents that were kept frozen and shipped to the National Archives.

without going back through the liquid phase. The dry items came out looking the same as they did when going into the vacuum freeze-drying chamber (e.g., the books were still distorted, photographs were still stuck together). While the vacuum freeze-drying had rendered the materials dry and the mold inactive, much work remained to be done. The trunks were then transferred to the National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Since the collection's arrival in the United States, NARA has provided for security, preservation guidance, and oversight of the IJA. But because this is not a U.S. government collection, NARA funds could not be used for this project.

In late 2005, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) awarded the Center for Jewish History approximately \$98,000 to fund the second phase of the preservation project. The center used the grant to hire paper conservator Susan Duhl and conservation technician

Daniel Dancis to work under the direction of the National Archives.

The conservation team unpacked the trunks, assessed and documented the condition of the collection, and housed the books and documents in preservation quality paper wrappers and boxes to provide improved storage. The presence of mold spores—even though inactive—still posed a health risk.

Before handling or photographing the materials, staff cleaned off at least some mold while working under a fume hood and using a filtered vacuum and soft brushes. The team



for preservation and exhibition; they will be returned to Iraq in 2014.

The exhibition, in both English and Arabic, tells the story of the documents and how they are being preserved and made accessible worldwide. From November 8, 2013, through January 5, 2014,

Over 60 copies of this Hebrew elementary school primer were recovered. It was the only title to be found with so many duplicates.

visitors will be able to see 24 original documents and books in Washington, D.C., in the Lawrence F. O'Brien Gallery at the National Archives. The remarkable survival of this written record of Iraqi Jewish life provides an unexpected opportunity to better understand this community.

From the first assessment of the wet and moldy books and documents, the National Archives and its partners have worked to ensure their preservation and accessibility. Through cataloging, conservation, digitization, and posting online,

assigned each item, whether a book or group of documents, an inventory number in a database and attached digital photographs of title pages and book covers. Based on these photographs, Hebrew- and Arabic-speaking catalogers provided preliminary descriptive information and, where feasible, cataloging information.

Planning for Preservation and Access: Advice from a Group of Experts

To help set preservation priorities, a group of experts knowledgeable in Jewish history, Iraqi and Middle Eastern history, the Iraqi Jewish community, and Jewish rare books and printing met in May 2010. Working from the database, they reviewed the collection and made recommendations regarding priorities for preservation, access, and exhibition.

The experts included Reeva Simon, Yeshiva University/Columbia University; Jane Gerber, City University of New York; Michael Grunberger, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; Maurice Shohet, from the Iraqi Jewish community, later also from the World Organization of Jews from Iraq; Laura Leone, Center for Jewish History; and Bernard Cooperman, University of Maryland. Baidaa Abdulhareem from the Iraqi

embassy in the United States participated as well. A copy of the database and the review criteria were also provided to Saad Eskander, Director of the Iraqi National Library and Archives (INLA) to solicit INLA's perspective regarding the item-level review.

The third and final phase of the Iraqi Jewish Archive Preservation Project, funded by the Department of State in 2011, set out the actions needed to complete the project:

- Complete and refine the collection cataloging and database.

- Provide conservation treatment to stabilize and allow safe handling of collection items selected for digitization, and, as needed, more extensive conservation treatment for items to be exhibited.
- Digitize all archival documents and the priority books (those important for their content, rarity, and other special characteristics—less than 18 percent of the total).
- Create an exhibit with English and Arabic captions to be shown at the Na-



From left: Doris A. Hamburg and Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler of the National Archives and Reserve Maj. Corinne Wegener.

these books and documents will be accessible throughout the world to all who are interested.

Over 2,700 Jewish books and tens of thousands of documents, dating from the mid-16th century to the 1970s, were recovered. These documents and books were expropriated by the Baath Party regime from synagogues and communal organizations, although it is unclear what they hoped to learn from these Jewish community records and religious texts. Almost all the recovered documents relate to Bagh-

dad Jewish communal organizations, such as the Chief Rabbi's office, hospitals, and schools.

The recovered documents provide a vivid and unparalleled record of Baghdad's Jewish life from the end of the Ottoman era to the early 1970s. Iraqi Jews lived in a land that was physically and culturally linked to Judaism's central sacred texts. Babylonia in Ancient Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) is embedded in biblical lore. For centuries, Jews were well integrated into Iraq's generally tolerant, multicultural so-

ciety, with an Islamic majority composed of both Sunnis and Shi'ites and significant Kurdish, Christian, and Jewish populations. As Iraq modernized, Jews formed an important segment of the middle and working classes—active in business, government, professions, academics, music, literature, and trades. By 1949, an estimated 130,000 Jews lived in Iraq, primarily in Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul.

The unraveling of Jewish life in Iraq began in the 20th century, accelerating after the advent of Nazism to power in Germany



The flooded basement of the Mukhabarat headquarters, location of Saddam Hussein's intelligence directorate, May 2003



The volumes and documents were cleaned with soft brushes and a filtered vacuum.

mit safe scanning, but in most cases, conservation treatment does not eliminate the evidence of the water and mold damage that resulted from materials being submerged in the flooded basement.

All collection items were placed in custom-made boxes to provide safe, rigid support while expediting access to them later. Especially for books that did not warrant mold remediation and digitization, the custom boxes will also help contain any residual debris and, equally important for the mold-damaged materials, provide some environmental protection from fluctuating temperature and relative humidity. The Department of State funding (\$2.97 Million) allowed the National Archives to hire a superb team to execute the final phase by 2014.

Project manager Sue Murphy manages the day-to-day project and its many parts. Conservation work is performed by conservators Anna Friedman and Katherine Kelly as well as by conservation technicians Patrick Brown and Meris Westberg, who also provides custom housings.

Hebraic Librarian Dina Herbert develops cataloging information, integrates work

tional Archives in Washington, D.C., and in Iraq.

- Create a website to provide access to the listing of all of the IJA contents, image files of the digitized items, an online version of the exhibitions, and a description

of the Iraqi Jewish Archive Preservation Project.

- Provide fellowships for Iraqi conservation professionals.
- Box, crate, and return the materials to Iraq.

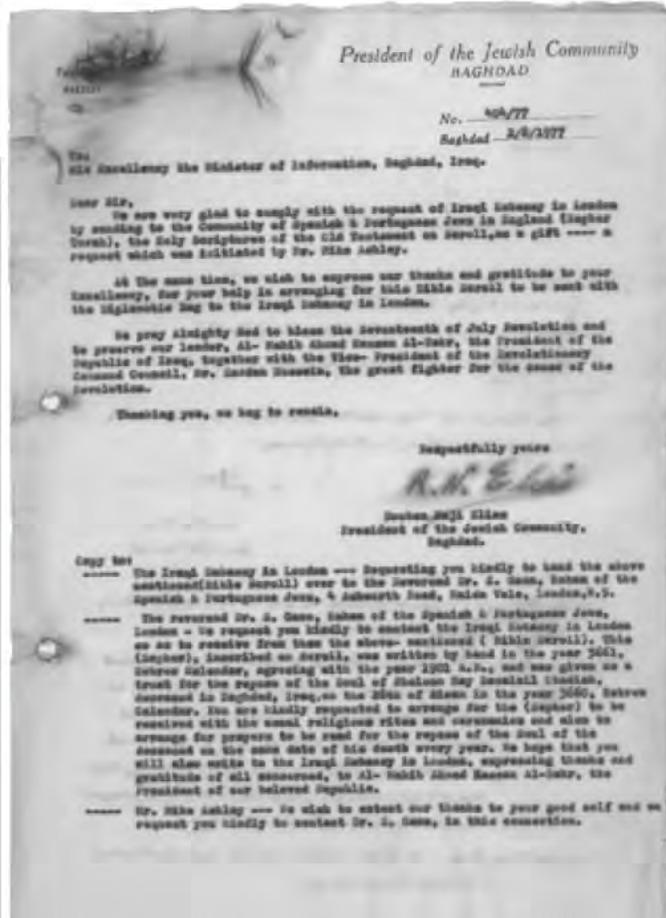
Physically distorted items have been flattened enough to per-

and the proliferation of anti-Jewish propaganda. In June 1941, after the defeat of the pro-Nazi Iraqi regime, an anti-Jewish attack, known as the "Farhud," broke out in Baghdad during the Jewish festival of Shavuot. An estimated 180 Jews were killed, and hundreds were injured, while great numbers of Jewish homes and businesses were looted and destroyed.

As Iraq entered the war against the newly founded State of Israel in 1948, Iraqi Jews were increasingly arrested and persecuted. In September 1948, a prominent Jew in

Iraq was publicly executed for the alleged crime of treason. Although losing citizenship and assets, Iraqi Jews rushed to emigrate, and be-

This 1977 letter explains how the Jewish Community of Baghdad worked with Revolutionary-era government officials to allow for the transfer of a Torah scroll to England.





A key project goal was to digitize all archival documents and priority books and make them all freely available online by mid-2014.

done by staff with Arabic language expertise (Ryann Craig, Huda Dayton, and Jeffrey Abadie), and provides assistance and guidance in developing item-level priorities and metadata creation. Daniel Feeley provided administrative and lab support.

Project digitization staff consists of two preservation imaging specialists, Noah Durham and Jennifer Seitz, and three imaging technicians, Christine Huhn, Randy Sullivan, and Norris White. The imaging specialists selected equipment, developed efficient workflows and protocols appropriate to the project goals, and have been leading the work to develop the IJA website.

tween 1950 and 1951, almost 120,000 Jews left Iraq, leaving only a small number behind to continue the community's 2,600-year-old presence.

The community continued to function from 1950 through the 1970s under significant constraints. These recovered books and documents provide a vivid picture of the persistence of Jewish organizational life in Baghdad despite the dwindling numbers of Jews and increasing insecurity. Jews and other minorities faced ongoing persecution following the Revolution of

Over the life of the project, Gary M. Stern, NARA general counsel, has been a key adviser. Throughout the project, many staff at the National Archives have contributed invaluable expertise, support, and assistance on legal, database, personnel, financial, web, contracting, security, technology, conservation, digitization, video, photography, and congressional and public affairs matters. We greatly appreciate their many important contributions to the project.

Historic Documents Available On Archives Website

A key accomplishment of the preservation project is making the IJA books and documents freely available online to the broadest possible audience worldwide. The website www.ija.archives.gov launched in November 2013 with a portion of the collection; all IJA materials will be added by mid-2014.

The exhibition "Discovery and Recovery: Preserving Iraqi Jewish Heritage," also discussed in this issue of *Prologue*, provides another fascinating window onto the books and documents, the work to preserve them, and the long, vibrant history of the Iraqi Jewish community that is now dispersed throughout the world. The exhibi-

tion will also be available online at www.ija.archives.gov.

1958 and the rise of the Ba'ath party in 1963, culminating in the public hanging of nine Jews in January 1969.

Iraqi Jewish heritage continues as a vibrant and living tradition in Iraqi Jewish communities worldwide. Rituals, language, recipes, songs, and literature flourish in synagogues, homes, and communal organizations. The carefully preserved books and documents discovered in the Iraqi intelligence headquarters in 2003 also help continue the heritage of Iraqi Jewry.

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In many ways, the project has proved itself to be a successful model for international partnerships and interagency teamwork, as well as governmental and nongovernmental collaboration.

The National Archives and Records Administration, Department of State, Government of Iraq, Iraqi National Library and Archives, Department of Defense, Center for Jewish History, National Endowment for the Humanities, World Organization of Jews from Iraq, American Jewish Committee, B'nai B'rith, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Library of Congress, and other organizations and individuals have contributed in different ways. Together they have achieved the goal of ensuring the preservation and worldwide access to these special books and documents that evoke the collective memory of the ancient and vibrant Iraqi Jewish community. **P**

Authors

Doris A. Hamburg is the Director of Preservation Programs at the National Archives. She directs the Iraqi Jewish Archive Preservation Project for NARA.

Mary Lynn Ritzenhaller is the Chief of Conservation at the National Archives; she has directed the conservation work and other facets of the Iraqi Jewish Archive Preservation Project.

Authors

Gabriel Goldstein, a museum consultant and independent curator, served as guest curator for the "Discovery and Recovery" exhibition. He is a specialist in Jewish history, art, and material culture and worked for over two decades at Yeshiva University Museum in New York. He is the Adjunct Curator of Judaica at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, and consults for many museums.

Lisa Royse has worked in the museum field for over 30 years both in the private and public sectors. At the National Archives, she has been the curator at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum and is currently the National Museum Programs Coordinator in Washington, D.C. Lisa is the project manager for the exhibition "Discovery and Recovery: Preserving Iraqi Jewish Heritage."

