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Discovery and Recovery: Preserving Iraqi Jewish Heritage

[Yorba Linda]...On September 4, the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum will open a new exhibition, ***Discovery and Recovery: Preserving Iraqi Jewish Heritage***. The exhibit details the dramatic recovery of historic materials relating to the Jewish community in Iraq from a flooded basement in Saddam Hussein's intelligence headquarters, and the National Archives' ongoing work in support of U.S. Government efforts to preserve these materials. *Discovery and Recovery* is presented by the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, one of 13 Presidential Libraries operated by the National Archives. The exhibit runs through November 15.

In both English and Arabic, the 2,000 square foot exhibit features 23 recovered original items and a "behind the scenes" video of the fascinating yet painstaking preservation process.

Background

On May 6, 2003, just days after the Coalition forces took over Baghdad, American soldiers entered Saddam Hussein's flooded intelligence building. In the basement, in four feet of water, they found thousands of books and documents relating to the Jewish community of Iraq - materials that had belonged to synagogues and Jewish organizations in Baghdad.

The water-logged materials quickly became moldy in Baghdad's intense heat and humidity. Seeking guidance, the Coalition Provisional Authority placed an urgent call to the nation's foremost conservation experts at the National Archives. Just a week later, National Archives Director of Preservation Programs Doris Hamburg and Conservation Chief Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler arrived in Baghdad via military transport to assess the damage and make recommendations for preservation of the materials. Both experts share this extraordinary story

and take you “behind the scenes” in this brief video www.ija.archives.gov/exhibit/exhibit. This video is in the public domain and not subject to any copyright restrictions.

Given limited treatment options in Baghdad, and with the agreement of Iraqi representatives, the materials were shipped to the United States for preservation and exhibition. Since then, these materials have been vacuum freeze-dried, preserved and digitized under the direction of the National Archives. The collection includes more than 2,700 Jewish books and tens of thousands of documents in Hebrew, Arabic, Judeo-Arabic and English, dating from 1524 to the 1970s. The special website, launched to make these historic materials freely available online worldwide, is www.ija.archives.gov.

“This exhibit is a bit of a departure for the National Archives since the materials on display are not U.S. Government records, but the National Archives is integral to the story of *Discovery and Recovery*. Our Preservation Program’s reputation as a leader in documents preservation and disaster response and recovery prompted the call for help back in 2003. Our talented and dedicated staff have done a superb job of preserving these culturally valuable records and so they are now accessible to tell the fascinating story of the ancient Iraqi Jewish community through this beautiful exhibit and website,” remarked the Archivist of the United States David S. Ferriero.

The preservation, digitization, and website were made possible through the very generous financial support of the U.S. Department of State. The National Endowment for the Humanities in partnership with the Center for Jewish History were very helpful in providing key start-up support for the project.

The Jews of Iraq have a rich past, extending back to Babylonia. These materials provide a tangible link to this community that flourished there, but in the second half of the twentieth century dispersed throughout the world. Today, only a few Jews remain.

Display highlights include:

- A Hebrew Bible with Commentaries from 1568 – one of the oldest books in the trove;
- A Babylonian Talmud from 1793;
- A Torah scroll fragment from Genesis - one of the 43 Torah scroll fragments found;
- A Zohar from 1815 – a text for the mystical and spiritual Jewish movement known as “Kabbalah”;
- An official 1917 letter to the Chief Rabbi regarding a request to Allow Jewish Prisoners to Attend Worship for Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year);

- Materials from Jewish schools in Baghdad, including exam grades and a letter to the College Entrance Examination Board in Princeton regarding SAT scores;
- A Haggadah (Passover liturgical text) from 1902, hand lettered and decorated by an Iraqi Jewish youth; and
- A lunar calendar in both Hebrew and Arabic from the Jewish year 5732 (1971-1972) - one of the last examples of Hebrew printing produced in Baghdad.

Discovery and Recovery is divided into six sections:

Discovery: The dramatic story of how these materials were found, rescued and preserved is one worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster. A short film captures these heroic efforts. The section includes the actual metal foot lockers used to ship the documents to the United States.

Text and Heritage: This section explores Iraqi Jewish history and tradition through recovered texts, including a Torah scroll fragment, a Hebrew Bible with Commentaries from 1568, and a Babylonian Talmud from 1793.

Iraqi Jewish Life: Constancy and Change: Using recovered texts, this section explores the pattern of Jewish life in Iraq. Highlights include a Haggadah (Passover script), siddur (prayer book) and an illustrated lunar calendar in both Hebrew and Arabic (one of about 20 found that date from 1959-1973).

Personal and Communal Life: Selected correspondence and publications illustrate the range and complexity of Iraqi Jewish life in the 19th and 20th centuries. Original documents and facsimiles in flipbooks range from school primers to international business correspondence from the Sassoon family.

After the Millennia: Iraqi Jewish life unraveled in the mid-20th century, with the rise of Naziism and proliferation of anti-Jewish propaganda. In June 1941, 180 Jews were killed and hundreds injured in an anti-Jewish attack in Baghdad. Persecution increased when Iraq entered the war against the new State of Israel in 1948. In 1950 and 1951, many Iraqi Jews were stripped of their citizenship and assets and the community fled the county en masse. This section includes the 1951 law freezing assets of Iraqi Jews.

Preserving the Past: It is not surprising that the Coalition Forces turned to National Archives conservators for help. Learn about transformation of these materials from moldy, water-logged masses to a carefully preserved, and accessible enduring historic legacy. View the National Archives' state-of-the-art treatment, preservation, and digitization of these materials.



Related Public Programs at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum:

The Nixon Library will offer programming in conjunction with the exhibit. The first program is a free public lecture on Friday, September 4, at 10 am with Doris A. Hamburg, the National Archives Preservation Director who traveled to Bagdad and led the efforts to save these unique treasures. Ms. Hamburg will provide an inside account of the process by which these items were saved and their cultural importance. Further information and registration details are available at www.nixonlibrary.gov.

This exhibition was created by the National Archives and Records Administration, with generous support from the U.S. Department of State. More information is available at www.archives.gov and www.ija.archives.gov.

The Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum is one of 13 Presidential Libraries operated by the National Archives and Records Administration. The Nixon Library is located at 18001 Yorba Linda Blvd., CA, and is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., with the exceptions of Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day. The Museum is fully handicapped accessible. For more information, call 714-983-9120 or go to www.nixonlibrary.gov.

The Richard Nixon Foundation is a privately supported, non-profit institution dedicated to educating the public about the life, legacy, and times of the Thirty-Seventh President.

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