

## Chapter 2

# Jewish Settlers in Japan at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

After the 1905 Russian revolution, the next major migration of Jews from Russia began in late 1917, when thousands of Jews fled after the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing civil war. A large portion of these new refugees sought safety in Japan. Some five thousand of them made their way there, mainly through Yokohama, that being Japan's major port of entry. The majority of these then attempted to immigrate to the United States, and some even secured entry visas. Those lucky enough to do so departed alone, leaving their families in Japan until they would be ready to travel to America and join them. Many families in this situation found themselves destitute and sought help from the Yokohama Jewish community. In 1919, matters grew worse when American immigration laws were revised and became far more restrictive. Hundreds of families were stranded in Yokohama with no one but the local Jewish community members to provide for their basic needs. Some financial aid came from the American Jewish organization HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Association), whose major benefactor was Jacob Schiff, whose actions previously have been discussed in Chapter 1. HIAS sent a special emissary by the name of Samuel Mason to Asia to open offices in Manchuria, Kobe, and even Vladivostok to help Jewish refugees make their way to America. He was provided with an introductory letter from Jacob Schiff, which helped open Japanese government office doors for him. That in turn enabled many of the refugees to relocate to Kobe. From there, hundreds eventually left for America, some went to Shanghai, and hundreds settled in Harbin and other cities in Manchuria. A handful decided to travel to Palestine. Among the last group was Moshe Medzini, the father of the present writer.<sup>1</sup>

Some 1,700 Jewish refugees were stranded in Japan at the beginning of this period, but they were eventually able to either settle there or to use it as a transit point on their way to other destinations.

## The Kobe Community<sup>2</sup>

The third-largest Jewish community in Japan was in Kobe. It grew mainly as a result of the decline of Nagasaki and the arrival in 1923, following the great Kanto earthquake which destroyed much of Tokyo and Yokohama, of many Jews who had previously lived in those two cities. In the 1920's and 1930's, Kobe became the largest and most important Jewish community in Japan. The original Jewish settlers in that port city, which had been opened to trade and settlement of foreigners in 1868, were Iraqi and Iranian, in addition to a few Russians. On the eve of the Second World War, there were some hundred Jewish families in Kobe, about half of them Ashkenazim (of European origins) and the other half Sephardim (of Middle East origins). They were prosperous enough to establish and maintain communal institutions, among them two separate synagogues and a ritual slaughterer who provided kosher meat. This community would play an important role in helping European Jews find temporary shelter in Kobe in the late 1930's until 1941. Being a port city, situated some thirty kilometers northwest of Osaka, Japan's second-largest city, Kobe also served as an exit port for those who sailed to America.

Prior to discussing the core issues relating to the prevailing Japanese attitude toward the Jews, it is useful to expand the discussion to when, and under what circumstances, ordinary Japanese people and their rulers might encounter Jews. We have already noted that Jews played no role in Japan before, during, or immediately after the Meiji Restoration. There is no evidence that Japan's future leaders who were sent to the United States and Europe with the Iwakura Mission (1871-1872) to study government, education, industry, economics, and law met American or European Jews in their travels. One Jew did have an impact on the development of the Meiji constitution: the German-Jewish law professor Albert Mosse, who was invited by Prince Ito Hirobumi (1841-1909) to come to Japan to help write it. Mosse, however, was viewed by the Japanese as a German and not as a Jew, and apparently made no mention of his Jewish origins.

Curiously enough, many Japanese people made their first indirect acquaintance with Jews through Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, which was first translated and staged in Osaka in 1885 and then became part of the English-language curriculum in Japanese schools. Therefore, many Japanese readers thought that the typical Jew was Shylock-like: clever, sly, untrustworthy, and given to devious intrigues and manipulations. This stereotype of the Jew as a super-manipulator will reappear again and in greater

strength in the 1920's, 1930's, and even in the 1980's, when antisemitic literature enjoyed a revival in Japan.

Some of the modern scholars who have researched the phenomenon of antisemitism in Japan, chiefly David Goodman and Miazawa Masanori, attribute the great popularity of *The Merchant of Venice* not to any preexisting antisemitic concepts but to domestic Japanese developments. They argue that the rapid process of modernization in Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century increased local interest in money, finance, banking, trade, and the legal matters connected with them and those involved in them. This was in stark contradiction to the prevailing ideology of the Tokugawa era, which placed merchants in the fourth social stratum, after samurai, peasants, and artisans, and just above the pariahs.

Japan's rapid modernization and fast economic growth led to a change in the position and standing of merchants, who now played a key role in the economic and industrial development of Japan. Even though the figure of Shylock was seen in a negative light by most Japanese people, to some he portrayed the new entrepreneur, who deserved to be emulated and respected.<sup>3</sup>

Another way in which the Japanese public became acquainted with Jews and Judaism was through the Christian faith. In 1873, all restrictions on Christianity in Japan were lifted, but toward the end of the nineteenth century, Christians numbered less than one percent of the total population. Those few Japanese converts to Christianity were introduced to the religion partly through the study of the New Testament, which was translated into Japanese by missionaries in the mid-1880's. Those interested in Christianity were through the New Testament exposed for the first time to the Jewish origins of Christianity, and even some of its anti-Jewish contents. Although the small number of Christians in Japan meant that they did not have much influence, they nonetheless did enjoy special treatment, partly because Christianity was seen as a Western religion. Since the West was successful and was now being emulated by a growing number of Japanese, the new Japanese elite became more aware of this, its main religion.

Evidently, the few Jews who resided in the three communities of Nagasaki, Yokohama, and Kobe were not noted for their social contact with the local Japanese population, and therefore they left no impact on the Japanese environment. These Jewish communities had no influence on Japanese politics, society, media, universities, or even the economy, exactly the opposite from their Western European and US counterparts' huge visibility in all these sectors. They did not serve in the armed forces of Japan,

while there were numerous Jews who served in various armies in Western and Eastern Europe and even in the United States.

The major reason for this strong separation, I believe, was the language barrier. Jews did not generally acquire command of Japanese, and thus could not become part of the local elite. They were basically seen as part of the foreign community, but even in that group they kept to themselves. This is one reason why Japan did not begin to ponder over the “Jewish Question” that plagued many Christian countries in Europe and even the newly-emerging nationalist movements in the Arab and Muslim countries.

The tiny minority of Japanese people who were interested in Christianity included some who started to wonder about the origins of the Christian faith after reading its bible. This led them to study the historic background of that religion and its development, and connect it to Judaism and the Holy Land. This is also a reason why the Japanese attitude toward Jews was not loaded with negative historic connotations, such as the canard that the Jews killed Jesus. The image of Jews among those very few Japanese people who thought or cared about them was one of an economically successful people, highly influential in Western societies.<sup>4</sup>