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Forgotten refugeesEffort under way to focus on Jews of Arab lands

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Most everyone knows that Israel's creation in 1948 led many Palestinian Arabs to flee to refugee camps.

Much less is known about another refugee group: Jews who fled Arab lands. An effort is under way to heighten their visibility.

On Wednesday of last week, one of those Jewish refugees told her story to a group of about two dozen local synagogue and Jewish agency representatives brought together by the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington. And leaders of a group representing such refugees said that they want the Jewish refugee issue to be part of the agenda in future Middle East peace talks.

Those attending were urged to return to their synagogue and plan a program on the issue sometime in the next couple of months. They received a packet of materials to facilitate planning such an activity.

"The broader Jewish community has no idea" about this issue, said JCRC executive director Ron Halber. "As we educate ourselves about it," he said, "then we can go" to the wider community.

In 1948, some 856,000 Jews lived in Arab countries, according to Justice for Jews in Middle East Countries executive director Stanley Urman. Twenty years later, that number was just 72,600, and by 2001 only 7,800 (with 5,700 of that number in one country, Morocco.)

Regina Waldman was among those ultimately forced to leave her home in Libya.

Addressing the gathering at Magen David Sephardic Congregation in Rockville, she said that while she was growing up, Jews, who weren't allowed to leave the country were "tolerated, but didn't have human rights."

To illustrate, she recalled a school lesson when she was 6 years old. A teacher asked the students, "If you have 10 Jews and you kill five of them, how many are left?"

At the time of the Six Day War, rioting broke out in the streets of Libya. The then-19-year-old was taken into hiding by a British Christian, she recalled. A few weeks later, Libya expelled all its Jews, taking their property. She said that she and her family barely made it out alive < they had boarded a bus and soon realized the driver was going to set the vehicle on fire, but the same Brit who had hidden Waldman rescued the family.

Following the Sept. 11 attacks in this country, Waldman decided that "maybe I should tell my story" and founded

the organization Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, or JIMENA, to educate the public.

She pointed out that she has spoken on college campuses with hostile environments toward Israel and is effective, because "it is hard to look at an eyewitness and deny the story."

Waldman was in town last Thursday to testify, along with other advocates, before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus on the issue.

At that hearing, JTA reported, Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-Fla.), who has traveled extensively in the Middle East, including to Israel, pointed out that the U.N. General Assembly since 1947 "has adopted 681 resolutions on the Middle East conflict, including 101 resolutions on Palestinian refugees. During that same time period, there were no U.N. resolutions, nor any recognition or assistance from the international community for Jewish and other refugees from Arab countries."

Urman, meanwhile, told the JCRC gathering that his organization had "one simple mission": Every time Palestinian refugees are mentioned, there should be a corresponding acknowledgement of Jewish refugees.

"It breaks the exclusivity" and "levels the playing field," he said, adding that "we cannot allow a second injustice" by recognizing "the rights of one population and not another."

The issue "is not about money," he said, and Jewish refugees, unlike the Palestinians, are not interested in returning to their old homes in Arab countries.

Yet, he didn't say that money would be refused, nor was he specific about what Jewish refugees from Arab countries want < other than for their story to be told.

"It is not up to us to decide, it is up to Israel" and its interlocutors to determine "whatever rights will be available," he said. "We don't demand specific rights, we just demand recognition."

Embassy of Israel spokesperson David Siegel said that "Israel attaches great importance" to the issue, noting that laws passed in 2002 and 2003 called for Israelis from Arab lands to register their property claims with the government for the purpose of future restitution.

"Justice and equity for those forced to flee from Arab states who subsequently made their homes in Israel" is a subject that "should be on the [diplomatic] agenda," said Siegel.

Urman's organization is also seeking to "register" as many Jews from Arab lands as possible, so that the group has a database of names with which to back up its awareness efforts. Registration forms are available on the group's Web site, www.justiceforjews.com.

Bethesda's Leo Rennert, attending the meeting as a representative of Ohr Kodesh Congregation in Chevy Chase, said his synagogue would definitely be following up < preparing a fact sheet about the issues for congregants, as well as programs for the congregation and possibly for religious school students as well.

Rennert said he felt the Jewish refugee issue would resonate among the wider Jewish community because "it goes to the very essence of the history of Israel and how it's misrepresented" by others.

"These people's histories have been swept under the rug," he noted, and yet there were more Jewish refugees from Arab lands than Palestinian refugees from Israel < according to figures provided by Justice for Jews in Arab countries, there were 130,000 more.

But Beth Allen of the District, who was representing Washington Hebrew Congregation, said that while she believes the issue is a valid one, she hoped that the Jewish refugees would develop a sharper message.

"I feel like they need a statement of purpose," she said. "They don't have a clear mission statement," noting that it seemed like the group was hesitant to state exactly what its goals were.

Interviewed Monday, Allen, 27, said she had passed information along to her synagogue's rabbis, but she was

unsure if the matter would engage the younger sector of the Jewish community.

Younger Jews have forged a connection with the Holocaust because of the many living survivors and other artifacts from the era, she said, but was uncertain that they would be able to develop the same sort of empathy for such an unfamiliar group.

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