

'Forgotten Refugees' remembered on film

By Lorne Bell - Monday March 31 2008

Documentary tells of nearly one million Arab Jewish exiles

For most people, the concept of a

More than 850,000 Jewish refugees have fled Arab countries.

refugee crisis is inextricably tied to the plight of the Palestinians. But as Israel declared its statehood in 1948, Arab nations of the Middle East and North Africa began the systematic expulsion of 850,000 Jews from their homelands. These refugees – known as Mizrahi Jews – are only now beginning to tell their tales, thanks in part to a newly released documentary film titled, “The Forgotten Refugees.”

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“We wanted to educate the Jewish community about an important part of Jewish history and heritage that, unfortunately, has been mostly unknown or ignored,” said Avi Goldwasser, the film’s executive producer.

The film was produced by The David Project and IsraTV, and drew an overflow crowd of 125 people to last week’s spring meeting of Hadassah at Mishkan Tefila in Chestnut Hill. The 90-minute documentary tells a story that is glaringly absent from the

discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, according to Mady Donoff, president of Hadassah’s Boston chapter.

“When people talk about the Middle East and displacement, they talk about the Palestinians, but the fact is that the entire Jewish community [from Arab nations] has been decimated and they can never go back,” said Donoff. “Israel assumed an enormous responsibility for them, unlike its Arab neighbors, who refuse to absorb their own.”

Several organizations, including the Jewish Community Relations Council, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, and Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa have sponsored House and Senate resolutions seeking recognition of the history of the Mizrahi Jews. The resolutions also call on the United States to address the refugees’ losses as part of any comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“It’s important that when Palestinian refugees are mentioned, the Jewish refugees are mentioned as well,” said Nancy Kaufman, executive director of JCRC. “We are not talking reparations. We are simply trying to educate the larger public that there are as many Jewish refugees as there are Palestinian refugees as a result of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and the expulsion of Jews from Arab lands.”

Despite the film’s political implications, its goal was largely apolitical, according to Charles Jacobs, president of The David Project.

“We wanted to tell the story without demonizing anybody, and I think that was masterfully done,” he said. “Our mission is to promote a fair and honest discussion of the Middle East conflict. What’s become the normal discourse is an un-contextualized description of the conflict, and one major result of that is the erasure of [the story

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of] the Jewish refugees. We wanted to do the mitzvah of reclaiming their heritage.”

That reclamation has been a long time coming for people like Denise Tellio, a Hadassah member and one of the 75,000 former Egyptian refugees forced to leave her home in the decades following the Israeli War of Independence.

“The Jews who left Egypt lost everything,” said Tellio. “We were forced to sign a statement on our exit visa that said we cannot come back.”

Even before Tellio and her family were forced into exile, Egypt, like most Arab Muslim nations, had rendered Jews second class residents under the dhimmi laws. These laws were enacted after the Muslim conquests of the 7th century, and were upheld to varying degrees by Arab leaders. Jews were denied citizenship, prohibited from participation in business and forced to wear an identifying yellow patch – the origin of the Nazis’ infamous yellow armbands.

As Israel began its long struggle against neighboring Arab nations, dhimmi laws were quickly expanded and accompanied by violent persecution, state seizures of Jewish assets and riots that incited the torture and murder of Jews.

In the resulting exodus, 600,000 Jewish refugees settled in Israel, and the remaining made their way to Canada, England, France, South America and, to a lesser extent, the United States. Today, only 7,000 Jews remain in Arab nations.

But despite the hardships that all refugees endure, Tellio drew a sharp contrast between her fellow Mizrahi Jews and the Palestinians.

“Jews had been in Egypt a long time – since Moses – but we knew we could not go back,” said Tellio. “It’s not that we didn’t curse the Arab regime that threw us out, but for our parents it was ‘Go out, study, get a job, become a mensch and do something with your life.’ I don’t think a Jewish mother would ever tell her kids, ‘Here is a bomb, strap it around yourself and go and blow yourself up.’”

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