

A Journey Through Jewish Baghdad

Baghdad

MAY 21, 2012 BY TONY

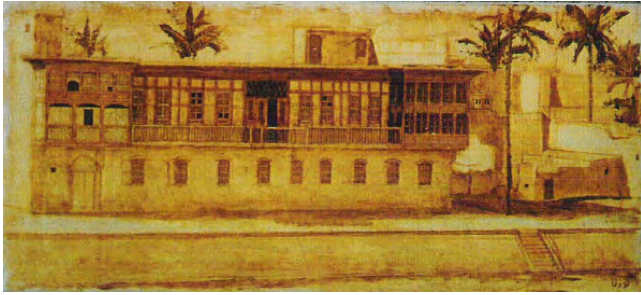
Lost Treasures of the Riverbank



(<https://memoriesofeden.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/beit-al-yehud.jpg>).

THIS is Beit al Yehud (the House of the Jews) by the artist Lorna Selim – one of the wonderful old wood and stone structures that once lined the banks of the Tigris in Baghdad . In an earlier post (<https://memoriesofeden.wordpress.com/2010/04/14/is-this-the-qasr/>) we told how Lorna had contacted us and kindly sent us a previous picture she'd painted of a typical Baghdad *qasr* (castle, or palace) dating from the era when Violette spent her childhood in such a one, built by her father.

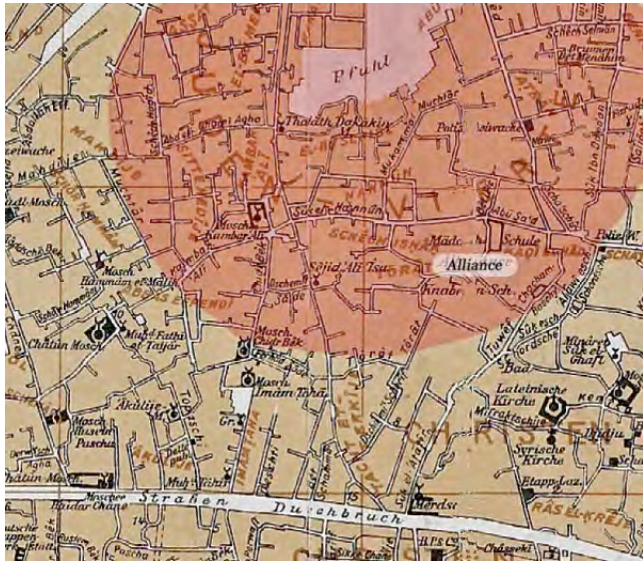
We are going back to a time when up to 40 per cent of the population of Baghdad was Jewish



(<https://memoriesofeden.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/qasr-1-copy-2.jpg>)

Is this Violette's qasr?

[*Ottoman Yearbook, 1917*] and Jews were dominant in all walks of life – from commerce to culture, governmental positions and every element of artistic endeavour. The wealthy families of the day all aspired to live on the riverbank in the (comparative) luxury these 'castles' afforded, away from the crowded and unhygienic alleyways of the old city's downtown areas like Hennouni.



(<https://memoriesofeden.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/hennouni-copy-copy-21.jpg>)

Hennouni – the old quarter

The Iraqi *qasr* was a masterpiece of architectural design, and the area of Karrada, where the family home was situated, was one of the most sought-after locations. Some of the old photographs on our [video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8j4ai84z1Hs) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8j4ai84z1Hs>) give an idea of their imposing presence – until, of course, everything changed in the Saddam years.

In the late Sixties such old properties were thought worthless; the land value outstripped the value of the buildings themselves, which were crumbling and in sad need of repair. Their owners, nearly all Jews, had fled. With no respect whatever for heritage the city began tearing them down and replacing them with modern constructions of dubious architectural merit.



(<https://memoriesofeden.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/babylon-hotel.jpg>)

The Babylon Hotel

Violette's *qasr* vanished, and the Karrada site was redeveloped to become a hotel – the Babylon – a modern monstrosity directly across the Tigris from where Saddam Hussein decided to build his bunker and command HQ. Today it is in full view of the new American Embassy in the Green Zone.

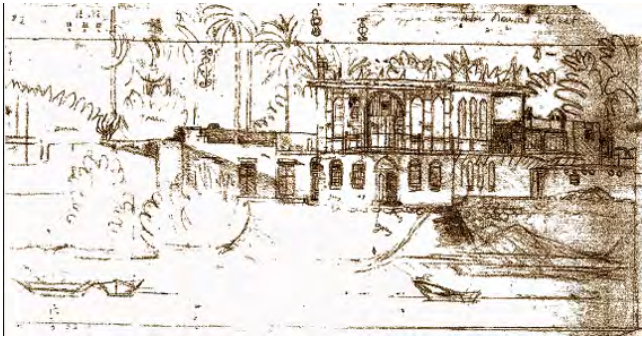


The view today from the site of the *qasr* (long demolished, now the Babylon Hotel). Across the river: the new US Embassy, in the Green Zone.

(<https://memoriesofeden.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/embassy-copy.jpg>)

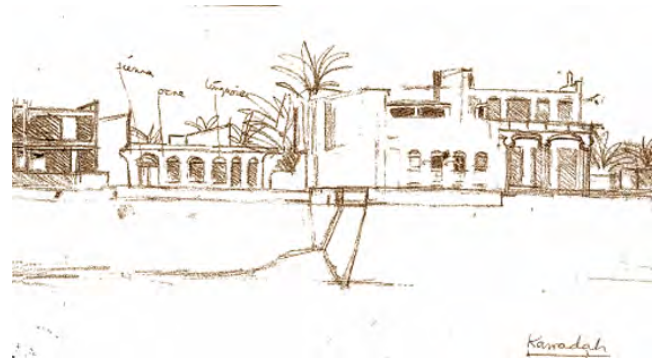
Karrada itself, where Gertrude Bell used to take country walks in the 1920's amid 'exquisite gardens with their ripe oranges hanging from the trees and the green barley springing under golden mulberry bushes,' has become home to the University of Baghdad.

Lorna Selim was an artistic witness to this wanton destruction, and rather as a court artist today manages to portray judicial proceedings (whether cameras were allowed in those days, or even thought necessary, is a fair question) she turned her skills to good use. As a house was being demolished she would quickly go to the site and bring out her sketchpad. She then went home to paint the base and outline, fully intending to return and fill in the details later. Only by then it was too late: the house was gone. Her daughter Miriam tells us: 'I recall reaching locations by six in the morning to get the early light and the empty streets as well as the cool morning air. By 8am it was insufferably hot and we would go home and she would be lost for the rest of the day in her studio.' Lorna had to seek out details of other nearby properties that were the same, or similar, or work from memory in order to finish her paintings. The results are probably the sole visual trace left of the beauty of the riverbank in those distant days, from which we can only imagine how rich was the life shared by the community fortunate enough to reside there.



(<https://memoriesofeden.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/house22.jpg>)

Here, thanks to her, are some more of her excellent drawings, (c) *Lorna Selim*, from which we can see the intricate way in which she developed her final work such as the oil painting of the Beit al Yehud. This was in an area Lorna calls Sinak. She says: 'I never took any photographs of the houses as I wanted the paintings to be my own interpretation of what I saw.



(<https://memoriesofeden.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/house3.jpg>) I do regret that now, but I was right at the time.

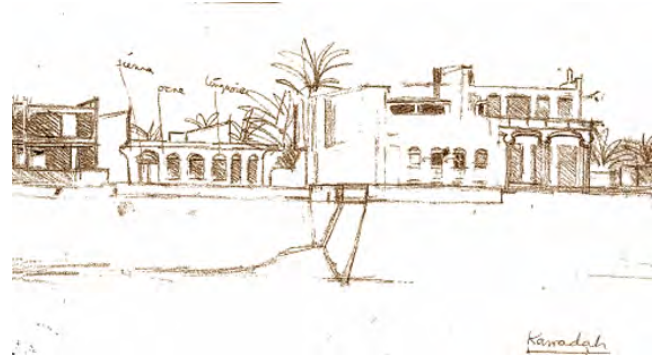
'The paintings were made between 1963 and 1970. Most of the houses were in poor repair or were falling down as I sketched them.'



(<https://memoriesofeden.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/demolition.jpg>)

Demolition in progress: the beginning of the end

We still don't know if the original painting



(<https://memoriesofeden.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/house31.jpg>) she sent us was the *qasr* at the centre of *Memories of Eden*, though she adds: 'I believe it could well be. I stood on the suspension bridge* to sketch it, so I can place it exactly on a map which compares with the map in the book.'

Our thanks to Lorna for allowing us the use of her Copyright work.

**Built much later*

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