

A Note on the Sir E.V. Sassoon Papers

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Sir E.V. Sassoon (1881-1961) was one of the richest people in the world in the 1920s and 1930s. He headed the E.D. Sassoon and Co. segment of the Sassoon family. E.D. Sassoon was a major international commodity trader, which had under its second owner Sir Jacob (1843-1916), Sir E.V.'s uncle, founded some of Bombay's largest cotton and wool textile mills. Besides the considerable charities, Jewish and general, that Sir Jacob funded, his mills provided employment to hundreds of Baghdadi and Bene Israel Jews.

The history of the Sassoon Family as a whole is culled out of numerous sources, which all refer to E.V. in a greater or lesser extent as Sir Victor (as we will call him in this paper). The two most cited sources are a Cecil Roth volume with special emphasis on the Jewish aspects of the Sassoons' history, published in the darkest days of World War II in England; and Stanley Jackson's *The Sassoon Dynasty* published in 1968.¹ I have summarized the literature on the family in a paper posted on my website, <http://timberg.us/publications/>, "Who are the Sassoons?"

David Sassoon (1792-1864) who established the family's position in India, had eight sons and numerous daughters. The sons mostly continued business as David Sassoon and Co. which remained a major Bombay firm. After his death, his second son, Elias David established his own separate company as E.D. Sassoon and Co., also a major Bombay firm.

In the late 1920s, Sir Victor was the representative of the Bombay Textile mill owners in the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi, and through the later 1920s he was a key spokesman for the Indian textile industry. He had succeeded his father in 1924 as a hereditary baronet and head of the family firm. However, in 1930, he announced that he was giving up on India and focusing his firm's new investment on China. From that point until WWII, he centered his commercial activity in Shanghai real estate, and built several structures which epitomize Art Deco there. He got out of China just before the Japanese invasion, right before it would have been too late, and spent most of the time during World War II in Bombay. During that period he sold off his textile mills to a group of cotton commodity traders, and his woollens mills to the J. K. Singhanias.

After the war, despite some efforts to recover his Chinese assets, he lost his Chinese properties. He is reported to have said, "I gave up on India, and China gave up on me." He settled in the Bahamas where, and to a lesser extent elsewhere, he continued his business activities especially in real estate until his death in 1961.

Sir Victor, as most of those who dealt with him note, was a larger than life figure, in continuous movement geographically, meeting everyone, left right and center, including Communists and shady operators, saints and sinners, the elite and thousands of humble people, male and female. He was a major race horse owner, leading socialite, and a figure in the racing world especially in India and England. He was as well a major business figure. In this, he differed from almost all his Sassoon contemporaries who left their marks in other fields of endeavor.

Sir Victor loyally supported many Jewish charities; his cousin Rabbi David Sassoon, noted that he always gave generously.² Until his sale of his Bombay properties during World War II, he remained the titular head of the Bombay Baghdadi Jewish community. Nonetheless Jewish involvements were relatively peripheral for him, of which see more below.

Toward the end of his life, he married his nurse Evelyn Barnes, with whose family he found a comfortable final refuge, and whose brother managed his affairs continuing after his death. That family has donated his diaries from 1927 to 1961 to Southern Methodist University in Dallas where they are now available along with photos and other materials. He was a keen amateur photographer.

I went through his diaries of the period 1927-1945. His niece, who took off a year after high school to accompany him on his world travels, told me he that used these diaries first and foremost as an aid to his memory of names of people he met, a use to which several business magnate diaries I have read, are put. There are passing references to lots of things and clippings from the newspapers which refer to others but the focus is on the names of all the people he met or were part of dinners and other social events he attended.

I am happy that I read through the diaries, but suspect that they will not be too useful for most researchers on Jewish history, or even Indian commercial history. The key exception would be someone focusing on the last two years of World War II for Jewish history in Bombay, or someone following commercial policy developments in 1927-31 in the Central Legislature. I append several illustrative references from the diaries.

He reports, for example on March 6, 1927 "Six Mohamedans offered to sell their votes for 2000 rupees a piece. I refused to consider any question of bribery." On March 9 he reports a comment by an ICS officer that if the rumor "that government have resorted to bribery" is true, it is the "beginning of the end."

During the late 1920s and again in the World War II period, he moved around extensively in India, visiting various places. On a November 10-11 1929 for example on a visit to Jaipur he goes to Ajmer and visits the Mayo College, "Nice lovely lot of boys."

He reports that the Japanese had offered him 50% of their worth of his assets in August 1941 and that he turned them down.

On November 10, 1941 he notes "RD Tata to dinner. Very bitter against British. Think they want positive chaos after independence."

On Jan. 17, 1942 he notes "In office, Govindram Seksaria, [a leading Bombay cotton trader], met me on his income tax troubles with [name unclear]". Sir Victor refers earlier to his own conflicts with the Bombay income tax authorities which must have been routine for businessmen.

There is some reference to dickering with the Singhanias about payment details for selling the Raymond Woolen Mills. However, there is very little on the sale of the Sassoon cotton textile mills. He notes details of a testimonial dinner, tendered him by the purchasers of the cotton textile mills, at the iconic Bombay Taj Mahal Hotel. There are references to farewell visits to the mills, and newspaper clippings including one about the anxieties of Jewish employees about the future. A more extensive account of the purchasers, albeit one which some have questioned, is contained in Stanley Jackson's book.³

The guests at the dinner on Dec. 13, 1943 included RB Bagla, Govindram Seksaria, Madhoprasad Morarkas, BP and D Poddar, R. Poddar, R. Morarka, Matadin Khetan, Sakharam Sekhsaria, [the preceding are all leading Bombay Marwari businessmen and probably among the purchasers] Sir Cowasji Jehangir, Sir Frances Low, Sr. W. Reynard, Sir Homi Mehta, Sir VN Chandavarkar, Sir Fred Stone, Sir RM Chinoy, Sir Joseph Kay, Mrs. Tandon (could this be Mrs. Prakash Tandon, the Swedish born wife of Prakash Tandon of Unilever? Her daughter thinks not, because they were fairly junior at the time, but she also says they were the only Tandons in the Bombay phone directory), C.P. Wadia, Mrs. Passmore, RC Church, Hardev Madhavdas, Shivnandrai Poddar, F. Ibrahimtoola, Naval Tata, Ms. Commisariat, E. Solomon, DL Davy, JK Raj, R. Kaidan, Dr. Jul Paten, Mrs. Enmriti, Kanji Dwarkadas, S. P Kura, M. Nemani, Eric Ellis, C. Parekh, P. Garg, Mrs. Peabody, Bagubhai Mafatlal, Kantilal Achalchand, B Modi, and Bhau Apte.

There is a reference to the sale of the cotton mills on September 19, 1943, a visit to the Jacob Mills (one of them) on September 30, 1943. There is also a clipping of an article in the Bombay Sentinel (a leading crusading nationalist newspaper) on Oct 1, 1943 on "Future of Jews in India." The article notes that "since 1920" many Bene Israel have been employed. A farewell visit to the Woolen Mills is noted on November 4, 1944. And a meeting of investors on November 4, 1944.

He notes a visit to the David Mill on September 27, 1945. This is interesting because it belonged to the Sassoon J. David Group, not part of Sir Victor's family, though the founder, Sir Sassoon J. David married his great aunt.

Jewish matters are sporadic – such as a visit to, and donation to the Ahmedabad synagogue. A generalization – though the Sassoon charities were primarily focused on Baghdadis, the Sassoons had continuing Bene Israel involvements. His aunt, Flora Sassoon's, servants in London were all Bene Israel. But most important were the hundreds of Bene Israel employed in the Sassoon Mills. Again there are references to visits to Jewish institutions, and Jewish relatives.

His visits to Calcutta typically included his cousin Sir David Ezra (head of Jewish community there), though they included B.N. Elias, the biggest post WWI Jewish businessman as well. Some of the family references reflect some emotional distance from the people concerned. When he meets Sir Philip Sassoon, a cousin and later the Minister of State for Air, a subject in which Sir Victor was actively involved and for which he raised funds throughout the late 1930s, he writes, "Saw Philip Sassoon on China Situation, he was quite nice to me." An injured World War I Pilot in the Royal Air Force (he used a cane), one of Sir Victor's major activities in the 1930s was promoting British air preparedness, and he was active in a number of Royal Air Force veterans groups.

In 1941, he notes that he met B.N. Elias, David Ezra, and GD and BM Birla at the Calcutta Club in Calcutta. (This was the "cosmopolitan" Club of which elite Indians were members like the Willingdon Club in Bombay, and in contrast to British only clubs) His executives in Mumbai and especially Shanghai included many Jews, and they frequently met with him.

In Ahmedabad on Nov. 17-18, 1929 he visited the Bene Israel Synagogue and made a donation of 100 Rupees, and had tea with the Bene Israel Community under Dr. Solomon. On November 26, 1929 "after dinner, went to Nagpada Neighbourhood House" which served the neighborhood where the poor Jews lived. On June 20, 1932 he opened the Shanghai Jewish School.

On April 9, 1940 while in Palo Alto, California, he visited the Jewish Club with lots of Jewish names at dinner. In New York he notes on June 2, 1942 "With Herman Leman [is this Herbert Lehman?] to Newark to dine at Temple B'nai Jeshurun [somewhere in New Jersey] "(Rabbi Weiss and 71 others) and talk on India, collected \$32 for [unclear] Leeds for British War Relief."

There was an elaborate visit to Cochin in the period around November 5, 1943 including meetings at the synagogue and with the leaders of the community. S.S. Koders wife was a cousin. They were perhaps celebrating the 375th anniversary of the synagogue.

A major exception in terms of his Jewish involvement was a canteen for Jewish Servicemen he supported in Mumbai, during the last two years of WWII, in which he involved himself in the details of catering and so forth. Roughly in these same two years, perhaps influenced by being cooped up there, he went to a number of local Jewish events and met community leaders – several of whom were distant cousins. However, he expressed surprise that anyone pushed to have the canteen closed on Jewish holidays and the sabbath. He notes Yom Kippur once, on October 1, 1941 in Mumbai and again on Sept 27, 1944 before an afternoon at the horse races. These are the only times it is referred to in his diaries.

He was the First President of the Central Jewish Board of Bombay, founded in 1943. He was succeeded by Dr. E. Moses, a Bene Israel leader, and then Meyer Nissim, another Sassoon cousin, and both also were Mayors of Bombay.

On Nov. 17, 1941 he addressed the Judaeon Club at the Sassoon School. However, it is in 1944-5 that the pace of his Jewish involvement increases.

On June 4, 1944 Ellis Judah take him to a workshop for Jewish girls. On February 2, 1944, Solomon Judah and Jacob Sassoon spoke with him "of communal matters." On February 3, 1944 he talks with Rosenfeld on communal matters.

On Feb 13, 1944 he "Visits Habonim Show at Cowasji Jehangir Hall run by Menasseh [probably Albert Menasseh, a distant cousin and Bombay Community leader] and Dr. Ellis Judah." He notes several attendants including Peter David. On March 9, 1944 "to Jewish Women's Association dinner at PVM Gym at which found Mr. Ellis Judah, Florence Meyer, M. Goorji, Mussry and Joseph Doris Marshal, daughter of [unclear] of Wavell [the Viceroy], and his cousin Victor [unclear] Joseph alleged to be Mr. M's boyfriend."

Habonim is treated extensively in a memoir by Rachel Menasseh, Albert Menasseh's widow, in *Baghdadian Jews of Bombay – Their Life and Achievements: A Personal and Historical Account*, (Great Neck, NY: Midrash Ben Ish Hai, 2013)

On March 10, 1944 he attended "Jewish Cooperative Jubilee, JE Solomon, Khan Sahib Samson" [this is a Bene Israel group]

March 11, 1944 Rosenfeld and Jewish chaplain at dinner.

March 22, 1944 "to Jewish Ladies' Dance where found Mr. [unclear] Rosenfeld, Frank Cohen, Mr. and Mrs. Solomon Judah, Mr. and Mrs. Ellis Judah, Florence Moses, Mr. and Mrs. Gourgey, Mrs. Francis Klein, Mr. George Hitchup, Mr. Lemande, Mr. and Mrs. [unclear] Salem (US Intel, Major Marty [unclear], and M. Jackson." On April 1, 1944 he notes Orde Wingate's death. On April 9, there's a note about a meeting of Jewish Hospital Committee.

On July 13, 1944 he has Rosenfeld and the head of Jewish relief to lunch. On October 12, 1944, he notes a visit with Rosenfeld and Pollack to Sassoon Service Club about architect and housekeeper selection. He visited it again on October 31, 1944 and notes that Rosenfeld is back from leave. He remarks about a "Great Success" at an event at this club on November 10, 1944. Again on November 13, he visits the Club and meets Rosenfeld John Klein. He notes a change of manager, as a Mrs. Weiss is to take over as manager.

Mrs. Pollack and Metzger ask for 1500 Rupees for WIZO [for Americans WIZO is what Hadassah is called everywhere else in the world] Bazaar and he gives 5000. On January 19, 1945, he notes, "Shochet to see me. Wanted only Matzo served in SSC over Pesach." There are more visits to SSC on Nov 17, 22, and 30, 1944.

For those who know her later role in the Mumbai community, on Dec. 2, 1941 he writes. "Met Sophie Kelly whom I had financed to go to London and who runs a Hill Grange School, Pedder Road, and is running [unclear] a show for the War Fund." And then on Dec. 12, 1941, "Went to Sophie Kelly War Fund show at Hill Grange School, Pedder Road, where me Mr. and Mrs. Venura."⁴

On June 30, 1940 he relays a joke about Jews in an anti-Semitic village "We don't allow Jews in this village. That why it is only a village."

Notes

¹ Cecil Roth, *The Sassoons* (London: Hale 1941)

Stanley Jackson, *The Sassoon Dynasty* (London: Heineman, 1968).

² From Stanley Jackson's account referred to in another footnote.

³ Jackson, op. cit., 264ff.

⁴ There is a picture of Sir E.V. visiting the school on page 223 of Menasseh, op. cit.

