



American Sephardi Federation

with Sephardic House

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American Sephardi Federation with Sephardic House Exhibition

Cochin Diary: Jewish Life in Southern India

Historic Sephardic Jewish Communities in the Diaspora

Opening at the Center for Jewish History

15 West 16th Street, New York

Monday April 3, 2006 at 7 PM

New York, March 20, 2006, —The American Sephardi Federation with Sephardic House announces the opening of its latest exhibit, *Cochin Diary: Jewish Life in Southern India*, featuring color photographs and historic objects that capture the spirit of the centuries-old community of Cochin in the Kerala region of southern India. The exhibition will be on display at the Center for Jewish History at 15 West 16th Street in New York City from April 3 through June 30, 2006. Admission to the exhibit is free of charge. Gallery hours are Monday-Thursday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Friday 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. and Sunday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The exhibit will open with an enlightening program featuring guest speakers Ambassador Neelam Deo, Consul General of India in New York, Dr. Kenneth Robbins, author and scholar of Indian Art and History, and photographer Joshua Eli Cogan. A Jewish-Indian buffet reception will follow. This event is open to the public with a general admission fee of \$25 and \$20 for ASF members, seniors and students. For more information or to reserve tickets, call 212-294-8350.

Cochin Diary: Jewish Life in Southern India celebrates the people and traditions that have for so long distinguished this small peninsula town in the Indian state of Kerala where local adherents of the world's four major religions coexisted peacefully for hundreds of years. Photographer-anthropologist, Joshua Eli Cogan powerfully conveys the spirit and evolution of this centuries-old community with a display of everyday, spiritual, historical, and anthropological imagery. Select archival video images and historical artifacts from the private collection of Dr. Kenneth and Joyce Robbins bring to life a once thriving Cochini Jewish community.

"The fascinating story of the Jewish community of Cochin, India is one of the many little known aspects of Sephardic Jewish history," explains Esmé Emmanuel Berg, Director of the American Sephardi Federation with Sephardic House. "The Cochin community grew significantly during the 16th century with an influx of Sephardic Jews primarily from Spain, Portugal and Holland, escaping the Inquisition, and others who emigrated from the Middle East. The newcomers were called "Paradesis," a word that means foreigners in Malayalam. This exhibition is one more endeavor towards fulfilling our mission to further elevate the understanding of the very rich history and culture of Sephardic Jewry."

It is believed that the history of the Jews of the Kerala region of Southern India goes back as far as the time of King Solomon and that Jews have resided in the city of Cranganore, just north of Cochin, since the period of the destruction of the Second Temple, 70 C.E. The earliest evidence of a Jewish presence dates to 379 C.E. when in gratitude for their contribution to the kingdom, the Jewish leader Josepeh Rabbon received a set of copper plates describing "princely rights" bestowed by the Indian ruler Sri Vanmar, pronouncing him "Prince of His Village." The Jewish rulers had all the rights reserved to the ruling families of the Indian kingdoms. "The Jews have been allied with the Rajas of Cochin for hundreds of years. The Rajas befriended, protected, and favored the Jews allowing them to openly practice their religion," notes author Dr. Kenneth Robbins.

In 1524, Jews in the "pepper trade" in Cranganore, just north of Cochin, were forced to flee to Cochin and found protection under the Hindu Raja. He granted them land adjacent to his own palace for a town that became known as "Jew Town," and for the Paradesi Synagogue built in 1568. Jews continued to come in small numbers throughout the centuries. They adapted the native language and customs but made certain efforts to distinguish themselves. At its height, it is thought that the community numbered in the several thousand Jewish families. While only a handful of Jews still live in Cochin today, remnants in "Jew Town" bear witness to how Jewish customs and Indian lifestyle mixed to create a rich culture apart.

The photographs are the work of documentary photographer **Joshua Eli Cogan** whose reportages span Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Europe, the West Indies and India. His deep interest in cultural anthropology suffuses his work and adds insight to his photography.

The **American Sephardi Federation (ASF)**, founded in 1973 to support American Sephardic communities, **with Sephardic House**, promotes awareness and interest in Sephardic culture as an integral part of Jewish and American history. ASF maintains the only Sephardic Library & Archives and permanent Sephardic exhibition gallery in the U.S., provides rich educational and cultural public programs and publishes scholarly books, memoirs and **The Sephardic Report**. Its ongoing activities also include the annual **NY Sephardic Jewish Film Festival** and the **Broome and Allen Scholarship Fund** for Sephardic studies and scholars. ASF also supports the **Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC)** efforts to further knowledge about the human rights violations suffered by close to 900,000 Jewish refugees from Muslim countries. At www.americansephardifederation.org one can access our catalogue database of over 4,000 book titles and 33 periodicals and an online bookstore featuring historical books, videos and DVD's of Sephardic interest. The American Sephardi Federation was one of the founding partners of the **Center for Jewish History**.

The Center for Jewish History has emerged from a vision of a unique central resource for the cultural and historical legacy of the Jewish people. The Center embodies the partnership of five major institutions of Jewish scholarship, history and art: American Jewish Historical Society, American Sephardi Federation, Leo Baeck Institute, Yeshiva University Museum and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. The Center serves the worldwide academic and general communities with combined holdings of approximately 100 million archival documents, a half million books, and thousands of photographs, artifacts, paintings and textiles — the largest repository outside of Israel documenting the Jewish experience. The Center's extensive program of exhibits, cultural events and intellectual gatherings will interest all who wish to explore the richness of the Jewish past and the promise of the Jewish future.

Support for the exhibition is provided in part by the TAJ Hotels, Resorts and Palaces, the New York Council for the Humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Government of India Tourist Office and David E. R. Dangoor. The exhibition is on generous loan from the B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum in Washington, D.C.