

Jewish Refugees Recall Aftermath of Israel's Rebirth

In the Middle East, much of the talk surrounding the Israeli-Arab conflict deals with land. Israel wants the world to know about hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees expelled from Arab lands as a result of the 1948 rebirth of the state of Israel.

"Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent, almost 900,000 of these Jews were exiled forcibly from their homes throughout the Middle East and North Africa beginning in 1948 when the State of Israel was founded," Dan Diker, secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress, told CBN News.

Another major wave of persecution hit after the 1967 Six Day War that forced most of the remaining Jews to leave 11 Middle Eastern and North African countries.

Linda Menuchin became one of those refugees.

"Nobody would want anything with the Jews, especially with the incitement going on in the mosques, so we were labeled like the fifth column," she recalled. "And also more constraints were put—like you couldn't take out from your own (bank) account ... more than 100 dinars a month."

In 1970, Menuchin and her brother left Baghdad for Israel, keeping their flight secret from their father, a prominent lawyer.

"We didn't even kiss goodbye because I thought we will meet again one day," she said. "I had to run away through Iran."

They escaped into the unknown.

"So we had only a very small suitcase with us, both of us, and just little money," Menuchin recalled. "I was disguised like

an Arab woman and my brother bought a very old coat. It was very cold winter.”

“To our big luck, everything went smoothly because at the time Jews were not allowed to be away from home more than 80 or 100 kilometers,” she said.

Such incidents happened all across the Middle East—expulsions, seizure of property, and murder of the Jews.

“In the aftermath of the Six Day War in 1967, the mob in Libya, especially in Tripoli and Benghazi, took to the streets and started burning the homes of Jewish people and ransacking our warehouses,” said American Gina Waldman, founder of Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, or JIMENA.

“And my father’s warehouse was burnt and then they came along and started pouring gasoline around my house,” she continued. “And a Muslim neighbor came down from the building and convinced the mob that the Jewish family wasn’t living there anymore, and of course he saved our lives.”

“I always felt that there was a sense of injustice, that even though we really made a good life for ourselves in whichever country hosted us, nonetheless we were never recognized for the wrongs that were done to us,” she said.

Two-thirds of the Jewish refugees resettled in Israel and the rest in other Western countries. Waldman and Menuchin both say they were traumatized.

Menuchin said there’s a message for the Western world.

“Eight-hundred-fifty-thousand Jews were expelled or were forced to leave or persecuted from Arab countries,” she said. “And when we try to overlook these issues they come again in a different way.

“So now it’s the turn of the Christians who are being killed, shot, and we cannot see really any effective action from the

West," she added.

For Israel, sharing the saga of Jewish refugees is part of gaining international recognition for their sufferings.

"We say, well, there are two sets of refugees," Diker said. "There are Jewish refugees and there are Arab refugees and both sides should be compensated together."