Yangon might seem an unlikely place to find one of South-East Asia’s most historic Jewish communities. But, as Aaron Cooper discovers, it is a community that’s fast disappearing.
As the sun sets over Yangon on a Friday evening, 60-year-old Moses Samuels waits patiently, eyes fixed on the front gates of the Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue, where he has been the trustee and caretaker for over 30 years. The faint hope that some Jewish visitors might join him to welcome the Sabbath disappears as twilight fades to dusk. Samuels rises, enters the temple, solemnly lights the ritual Shabbat candles and recites a prayer. There was a time when the synagogue would be filled with songs of praise on a Friday evening, but now only a few birds break the silence. Samuels, one of Myanmar’s last remaining Jews, turns away from the prayer candles and confesses, “It’s a lonely job sometimes... but a necessary one.”

Historically, the Jewish people of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, arrived as traders. Over time, they gained the respect of the locals and integrated easily into the patchwork fabric of Burmese life. But this once-thriving community, which in an earlier era numbered more than 2,100 in Yangon alone, is now teetering on the brink of extinction. Only 20 Jews remain nationwide.

The presence of a Jewish community here dates back to the early 19th century, when Sephardic Jewish traders from the Middle East stopped in Yangon. The British, who governed Burma at the time, encouraged them to stay. The community soon flourished as merchants from India and those fleeing religious persecution in Iraq began establishing businesses in Yangon and Mandalay. Samuels, a Baghdadi Jew himself, explains, “Both the British and the Burmese were tolerant of different religions. We embraced the country and became Burmese.” Under British rule, Jews achieved a respected place in society thanks to their donations to schools, hospitals and libraries and also to their leadership. At one time, both Yangon and the port town of Pathein had Jewish mayors.

“The beginning of the end for us was when the Japanese invaded,” says Samuels. “Most of the community left. It was a dangerous time and the Japanese were ruthless.” During World War II the Japanese occupied the country for almost three years and, because of their good relationship with the British, the Jewish community was viewed with suspicion. Many were jailed and some reportedly killed. Samuels’ own family had to flee after his father was suspected of spying.

Although the Samuels clan returned to their home after the war, the vast majority of Jews who had fled Myanmar did not. Instead, many found new homes abroad. The few hundred who did return found their businesses destroyed. When the Burmese government nationalised private businesses as part of a socialist agenda in the early 1960s, most of the nation’s remaining Jews moved on. Many
orthodox traditions, such as observing the rules of the Sabbath, were abandoned and the handful of Jews still here adopted a more reformed version of Judaism.

The Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue is located on a narrow lane in the Muslim district. The 115-year-old temple’s splendour testifies to the wealth of the community that once filled it. On a hot afternoon, a group of German tourists are guided into a chamber to gaze at ancient Torah scrolls that were brought to Burma from Iraq. The tourists soon approach Samuels with questions, which he gamely answers, after which each group member thanks him personally. Several make their way over to a nearby donation box.

Once a vibrant centre of Jewish life in Myanmar, the synagogue now only comes to life on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. On this day, the remaining members of the community gather to celebrate alongside Israeli embassy staff and the handful of Jewish expats working in Yangon. “But it’s not only Jews who come,” Samuels says. “I have...”
friends who are Muslim, Buddhist and Christian. They all come to celebrate and eat with us.” One of the reasons that services aren’t held more often is that the last remaining rabbi emigrated to Israel in 1969. “We rely on visiting rabbis, mostly from America, to lead our services. We are also dependent on our visitors’ donations to keep the temple going.” Although the synagogue is tended to meticulously, it shows clear signs of years of underfunding, with paint peeling off the walls and chairs coming apart at the seams.

Samuels realises that the glory days may be gone forever, but he remains optimistic. “The community may be disappearing but the Jewish spirit is kept alive through tourism now.” The temple sees an increasing trickle of tourists each month and is now a landmark on tour group itineraries. In response to the fresh interest, a small souvenir shop was opened in the temple. And, aware of the ever-expanding tourism market in Myanmar, Samuels started Myanmar Shalom in 2005, a travel agency with an emphasis on Judaism that he runs with his son and two daughters. “Burmese Jews that left long ago are now starting to take an interest in their heritage,” Samuels says. “Just last month we had five clients who were born in Myanmar but had not been here for 60 years! We helped them find the house where they used to live. Everything started coming back – childhood memories, even the food they used to eat. It was very emotional for them.”

A view of the street outside the synagogue. Above: Shabbat candles, wine and glasses on a table.
Conscious of his own lengthy history in Myanmar, Samuels says, “When I’m not here anymore, my son will come back and take care of the synagogue.” His son Sammy, now 30 years old, left for the US nine years ago to study and returns infrequently. He is also meant to find a Jewish wife to bring back to Yangon. The Samuels daughters will likely marry non-Jews, leaving their brother – the last eligible male among Myanmar’s Jews – with the burden of keeping both his family’s legacy and that of the community alive.

With so few Jews left here, it’s hard to ignore the very real possibility that the Myanmar branch of Judaism may soon die out. Samuels dismisses the notion. “I’m not worried about the future of the Burmese Jews. Me? I’m not going anywhere,” he says. “The times are changing in our country and I think the Burmese Jews will return home soon.” However, Sammy is not so optimistic. “I hope the Burmese Jews come home,” he says, “but I don’t think this will happen.”

Myanmar’s first recorded Jew was Solomon Gabirol, a commander who served in King Alaungpaya’s army in the 18th century. It is conceivable that when Sammy returns to Yangon for good, he may be its last.