



First-ever Photos of Yemen's Jews Stunned the Jewish World
When adventurer and photographer Hermann Burchardt arrived in Sana'a in 1901, he became the first person to chronicle this unique community's way of life

The search for the authentic Jew was a common pursuit among Jewish communities in the 19th century. Many asked themselves the question in one form or another: "Am I really living according to the ways of my ancestors?"

In those years, a young German-Jew who had just turned 30 decided to leave the family business and set off on a journey around the world that would incorporate two of his great passions: photography; and the study of ancient and exotic peoples. Hermann Burchardt decided to use his substantial inheritance to rent an apartment in Damascus, which would serve as the base for his research expeditions and adventures. He had already studied Arabic and Turkish, which he hoped to use to his advantage.



Hermann Burchardt.



A Jew in Sana'a, 1901. Hermann Burchardt

The synagogue of the Jewish community in Sana'a. Hermann Burchardt
Even before he set off on his travels, Burchardt saw himself as a citizen of the world, a man without limits, able to reach places no European had ever set foot before. On one of his journeys, in 1901, he encountered just such a place: In the middle of the harsh and barren desert, he reached the Yemenite city of Sana'a. On his wanderings around the hilly capital city, he was stunned by a group of people he encountered – members of the Sana'a Jewish community, whose ties to other Jewish communities worldwide had been almost completely severed for generations.



A Jew from Sana'a, 1901. Hermann Burchardt



Members of the Jewish community in Sana'a on a holiday day, 1901.



Hermann Burchardt



A workshop in Sana'a, 1901. Hermann Burchardt

Together with his large entourage, Burchardt spent nearly a year with the community. He got to know them personally, to study and document their customs, listen to their unique life stories, transcribing almost every word in his diary. And, for the first time in history, he photographed them. The article he published in the journal Ost und West included the spectacularly beautiful, first-ever photographs of the Yemenite Jewish community.

The images were nothing short of a revelation for European Jewry. After a break of thousands of years, there was at last a tangible sign of the existence of the Yemenite Jewish community. It seemed as if the world's most authentic Jew, who had lived completely isolated from any foreign influence, had finally been found – at least, this is what they believed in Europe. The article so excited the journal's readership that the photographs were turned into postcards, which were sold and circulated by the thousands.



Yemen in 1901.

Is this how Jews looked before the Exile? Are these the Jews of the Second Temple? For those who had been overwhelmed by the encounter with the Jews of Ottoman Palestine, the West's encounter with the isolated and remote community of Sana'a was even more astonishing. They wanted to examine the authentic Yemenite siddur; to analyze the differences between their and "our" biblical traditions; and, essentially, every tiny scrap of information about their unique customs.



Sana'a, 1901. Hermann Burchardt



A Jewish family in Sana'a, 1901. Hermann Burchardt



A street in Yemen, 1901. Hermann Burchardt

In 1909, while Burchardt was escorting the Italian consul on his way from Sana'a, the adventurous and learned ethnographer convinced the consul to take a route that had never before been traveled by a European. The grand convoy was ambushed by desert thieves: Hermann Burchardt and the Italian consul were killed.

At his funeral, Burchardt was eulogized by an Italian merchant who had befriended him on his last visit to Sana'a. He said the Jews of Sana'a, a community close to the famous adventurer's heart, were mourning his death.

Read more on the National Library of Israel's website