

Scattered among the nations

Bryan Schwartz talks to **Alex Galbinski** about his fascinating journey to discover the world's hidden Jewish communities

THERE'S an old Jewish joke about a man named Sam Goldstein, who stumbles upon a synagogue in Singapore and is amazed to find services held in Hebrew and Chinese. The Chinese rabbi greets Sam and asks if he is Jewish. Sam nods, but the rabbi replies: "Funny, you don't look Jewish!"

A new book, *Scattered Among The Nations*, by Bryan Schwartz, aims to challenge people's perceptions of what a Jew is, showing them that the stereotype of the New York, London or Tel Aviv Jew "does not capture the Jewish world".

The culmination of more than 16 years of collaboration between Schwartz and photographers Jay Sand and Sandy Carter, the book explores isolated and hidden communities, including the last Jewish shtetl in Azerbaijan, a Zimbabwean synagogue with its own Jewish gospel choir and a home on the range with Argentina's Jewish cowboys.

Schwartz, who is a civil rights lawyer in Oakland, California, says: "I hope *Scattered Among The Nations* will be an eye-opening experience for readers, as they realise the breadth of the Jewish world's diversity, shattering any stereotypes they may have ... that no racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic stereotype defines all Jewish people, but that many values and traditions do."

He adds: "Jews in West Africa, or the Andes, or in India look different, dress differently, eat differently, and speak differently. Hopefully, too, it will challenge us to confront stereotypes of other non-Jewish groups, too."

Schwartz's interest in other Jewish communities was piqued while he was living in Europe during his time at law school, and he would spend Shabbat in different places with the local community – for example in Avignon, France, in Zurich, Switzerland, and in London, UK. Looking to explore further afield, he decided to visit North Africa.

"I got my *Lonely Planet North Africa* guide and looked up 'Jews' in the index, and was shocked to learn about Djerba, a Mediterranean island,

off Tunisia's coast, where there were more than a dozen synagogues, the oldest Torah in the world, and a folklore about how the Cohanim from the Temple in Jerusalem fled there, when the Temple was destroyed," he recalls.

He wondered why he hadn't been taught about Djerba at Hebrew school and also how many other such places there must be.

"I had the idea to begin this project, to capture the multiculturalism of the Jewish world and share our beauty and diversity," says Schwartz, an observant Jew and former president of his Conservative synagogue in Oakland, Temple Beth Abraham.

Schwartz teamed up with Sand, whom he had known through BBYO (one of the largest Jewish youth movements for teenagers in America) while at secondary school, after finding out Sand was visiting Jews in Africa for a book on original music composed by the communities. Needing another photographer, they linked up with Carter.

Schwartz, now aged 43 and a father of two, was greeted enthusiastically and felt a kinship wherever he went. He travelled for three days to reach Sefwi Wiawso, in the Western Region of Ghana, where he had heard there was a Jewish community.

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Brian Schwartz

"They did not know I was coming, but no sooner had I disembarked and donned my kippah, than I was welcomed as a brother," he says. "After spending time with the community there, its then leader, David Ahenkorah, took me to a new frontier of Judaism, Sefwi Sui – where most people had never met an outside Jewish visitor, or even a non-African."

In north-eastern India, the Bnei Menashe arrived en masse at the airport to greet him and Carter. "They ushered us through security and into a waiting 4x4, and proceeded to escort us to more than a dozen



Every Shabbat morning, more than 100 members of the Shona Jewish community outside Rusape, Zimbabwe, gather at their tabernacle for services, wearing their best clothes, and sing original African-Jewish melodies in Hebrew, Shona, and English, resembling American gospel music. Photo: Jay Sand

villages throughout Manipur in the subsequent days – including many places which never had a Jewish outsider visit before," he says.

This was not unusual. "Communities all across the globe received me as long-lost family, and spent countless hours taking me to different parts of their Jewish worlds, sharing with me surprises and secrets."

Different things intrigued him about each community. He was inspired by the way the Incan Jews of the Peruvian Andes had handcrafted mezuzahs, and aleph-bet charts to teach themselves Hebrew, and had photocopied and were teaching themselves the Shulchan Aruch.

"I was amazed by the Marrano traditions of the Belmonte, Portugal Jews, including some of the masked Jewish holidays [they had] celebrated for centuries: Quinta Feira de Ascensão (Feast of the Ascension) was Shavuot, for example," Schwartz continues.

"I was moved by the sense of

humour the survivors in Ukraine still possessed. I have never eaten better – or more – than during Pesach with the Jews of Krasnaya Sloboda, Azerbaijan, where every family insisted that I join them for a seder. There are hundreds of stories like these in *Scattered Among The Nations*."

Some readers might be surprised by the communities that have chosen a Jewish path despite no previous Jewish roots, such as the Abayudaya of Uganda, who keep kosher, read Torah, circumcise their sons at eight days old and whose women observe their traditional laws of family purity after a local leader embraced Judaism in 1919.

Even without a Jewish past, the Incan Jews feel that "their present and their future lie with Judaism, that it holds the answers for them, provides them the tools they need for a meaningful life," explains Schwartz, who has also set up *Scattered Among the Nations, Inc*, a non-for-profit organisation to educate the world about Jewish diversity and help isolated Jewish communities to gain recognition and resources.

Some communities, for example the Bnei Menashe, who live along the

India-Myanmar border and believe their forebears were among the 10 Lost Tribes, have embraced Orthodox Jewish practices and want to move to Israel. "Several communities are so devout – and so isolated – that practising Judaism where they are currently is a great hardship," says Schwartz.

A lack of Jewish teachers, kosher food and the ability to observe Jewish holidays makes living a Jewish life in some places extremely difficult. "The Bnei Menashe also believe, as a Lost Tribe of Israel, that God needs them to return to Israel – that it is their holy destiny, their divine mission," he explains.

Asked if he thinks the book will appeal to non-Jewish readers as much as to Jewish ones, Schwartz says, "I do, in the same way that *National Geographic's* stories on varied cultures always capture the imagination."

"For non-Jewish readers, I hope that this is paradigm-defying – that it is impactful sociologically, ethnologically, historically and artistically."

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For more information on *Scattered Among the Nations* or to purchase the book, visit www.scatteredamongthenations.org.



David Ahenkorah looks up from praying the Mincha service in Tifereth Israel, the lone synagogue of the House of Israel community in New Adlembra, Sefwi Wiawso, Ghana, in West Africa. Photo: Bryan Schwartz



Inside the 200 year-old synagogue, in Bershad, Vinnytsia, Ukraine, the community still gathers, having survived the Cossacks, the Nazis, and the Communists. Photo: Bryan Schwartz



Lemuel Henkhogin Haokip's Shalomobile auto-rickshaw taxi in Imphal, Manipur, India. Photo: Bryan Schwartz