

Jack Goldfarb, who recently visited the Far East, reports on -

ALONG Rangoon's waterfront the sight of ships loading rice sacks and teak logs, and the sound of tinkling bells, even if only rung by passing rickshaw drivers, inevitably bring to mind Kipling's yearning for Burma and the exotic road to Mandalay.

But in Rangoon, city of pagodas, we were searching for the old synagogue. The practical street-numbering system makes it fairly easy to locate an address. We walked along the harbourfront road, past blocks of neglected-looking administration buildings, reminders of a bygone colonial era, all the while conscious of the cheerful, sloe-eyed faces peering curiously at the long-haired foreigner and his jeans-clad wife.

The most apparent vestige of a century of British rule, aside from the Victorian architecture, and the checkerboard layout of Rangoon's streets, is the prevalence of English as a widely-used language, a fact which makes many Western travellers grateful.

Gratifying too are the wide, tree-lined thoroughfares, with little automobile traffic. We boldly jaywalked across many broad roadways before

we entered the narrow, tenement-crowded street where we hoped to find the synagogue.

WOODEN MEZUZA

Halfway down the block, at number 85 on 26th Street, a shabby, yellowing stone building sat back from the sidewalk behind a much-repaired fence. No exterior lettering or symbol was visible. A wooden barrier screened the view of the front doors. But on its reverse side the barrier turned out to be a notice board. Several announcements written in a fine hand were on the letterhead of the Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue Committee. On the doorpost behind us, a large wooden mezuzah confirmed our finding.

The caretaker, a Burmese in a colourful longyi sarong, appeared from an adjacent hut. He informed us that no one could enter except for services on Saturday morning at 9 o'clock. At our insistence he gave us the address of the synagogue director.

On our way to find the director we trudged along a busy market street, where the haggling and the buying concentrated chiefly on

oranges, bananas, and papayas. A dearth of other goods were evident. Occasionally we passed men in long caftans and skull caps. Approaching one, an elderly blind beggar, we handed him some coins, and asked him if he were Jewish. "No," he answered, quite surprised, "I am Mohammedan."

The address of the synagogue director, Mr Samuels, was his place of business, a warehouse where banquet and party supplies were hired out. Mr Samuels was not in, but his assistant invited us to chat and wait. The conversation touched on the "Judaica" on the premises — a Hebrew calendar, a decorative prayer on the wall, and a mezuzah tacked by the door. The assistant, who was a Buddhist, said he often kissed the mezuzah "for luck." Why not? he remarked, he could always use good luck!

A RARE PLEASURE

Mr Samuels finally arrived. A swarthy, middle-aged gentleman in a white shirt, long Burmese skirt, and leather sandals, he greeted us warmly. For him it was obviously a pleasure to meet visitors from abroad. (Only a few years ago has the Burmese Government eased its restrictions on tourists, who had been a

rare sight in Burma for a long time.) Fetching the brass synagogue key from his desk, Mr Samuels accompanied us back to the house of worship.

The well-polished brass lock on the synagogue door snapped open to reveal a high-domed hall overhung with a balcony brightened by the sunshine streaming through the stained-glass windows. The sagging benches, the creaky floor, the faded red velvet curtains that covered the ark, all reeked of a more glorious past. There was an unmistakable emptiness although the bima overlooked a room crammed with benches and pews.

Above the ark a naked electric bulb glared as an eternal light, illuminating the twin marble tablets of the Ten Commandments. Inside the holy repository three timeworn torah scrolls rested in their oriental-style, round, wooden casks on the conspicuously vacant shelves.

The Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue had once been the centre of worship for a community of 5 000 Burmese Jews. They and their ancestors, both Ashkenazim and Sephardim, had arrived a century ago from India, Russia, Egypt, Iraq, and China at the time British authority was being established in lower Burma. In the 19th Century the British fought three wars to

assert their dominion over Burma, and yet another war in the present century to liberate Burma from the Japanese Occupation. During the latter war, there was a mass exodus of Jews, many being evacuated in the initial retreat of the British Army. After victory was achieved, Britain granted Burma full independence.

When freedom came, the Jewish population had dwindled to 250 souls. Since then there has been a steady depletion, most Jews going westward to India, Israel, and Great Britain, while others settled in Australia.

Today there are less than a score of Jews left in Rangoon. On Saturday mornings services at Musmeah Yeshua begin when the three regular worshippers arrive. The scene is a poignant one, but the lonely faith of the remnants of a pious and once-flourishing community conveys a message of persistent affirmation. On holidays a larger "turnout" of men and women attends the prayers. On such days the oldtimers recall with amused nostalgia how the women used to squabble over balcony seats for the best view of the chazan.

In Buddhist Burma all religions are guaranteed the right to practice freely. The skyline of Rangoon is dominated by the resplendent, golden Shwe Dagon Pagoda. Considered

the largest and most opulent Buddhist shrine in the world, this magnificent temple is crowned with five thousand diamonds in a setting of gleaming gold. Another majestic pagoda, 2 500 years old, stands in the exact centre of Rangoon. Along with hundreds of other pagodas, Hindu temples, Moslem mosques, and Christian churches abound in Rangoon.

UNPAID TAXES

The solitary Jewish synagogue, however, is struggling to stay open. Serious financial difficulties are apparent from the monthly balance statement posted on the notice board. Well over half of the remaining Jews are being supported by the synagogue's nearly exhausted resources. The meagre charities being distributed are constantly being reduced. Long-standing debts and unpaid taxes have accumulated. The final chapter threatens to be written for this historic place of worship.

Rudyard Kipling's familiar lines about Burma: "... somewhere east of Suez ... there aren't no Ten Commandments" may literally come true. For the time being, however, the light in the Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue has not gone out, and is still shining on the twin marble tablets night and day.

RANGOON'S JEWS

— A SURVIVING REMNANT