



Orit Sasson

## Aleppo (Halab) Jews in Kobe, Japan

Two large Jewish communities were active and still exist in Japan: one in Tokyo, the capital, and the other in the city of **Kobe**, located in the Kansai province in West Japan. Most of the Jewish community in Kobe in the early 1930's was comprised of Halab Jews. Jewish refugees who had fled the pogroms in Russia established two large communities in Japan at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: one in Yokohama (near Tokyo) in 1861, and the other in Nagasaki, in 1880. The great earthquake which struck Tokyo in 1923 had an impact on this community: the majority of the Jewish population in Yokohama subsequently ended up in the city of **Kobe**.

Kobe is one of the major port cities of Japan, and among the first to establish trade with the West in 1868. It is a city of trade and industry, also serving as a world

Orit Sasson, a lawyer and artist, is interested in peoples' culture, leading her to the study of languages, studies in Italy, research tours and the study of architecture at the Technion. Her interest in Halab Jewry stems, among others, from her being the daughter of parents of Aleppo origin.

Her review on Halab Jews in Japan was made in the framework of scholarships awarded by the Aleppo Jews Heritage Center

center for global pearl trade. These advantages have, over the years, attracted foreigners to Kobe, including Jews from Halab (Aleppo), Syria.

### Jews from Halab and Settling in Kobe

The Jewish community in Kobe was founded in 1905 by a group of soldiers from the Russian Army,

who had fought the Russo-Japanese War. But the core of its activity as a Jewish center began in 1930's. At the time, the Jewish population in Kobe included mostly Russian Jews as well as Jews from Germany and the Middle East. The community was predominantly Sephardic with an Ashkenazi minority. The Middle Eastern Jews arrived mainly from Iraq and Aleppo in Syria.

As to why Aleppo Jews had chosen specially to immigrate to distant and foreign Japan, **Joe Djmal** explains: "The Aleppians are merchants, and will go wherever one can do business!" According to him, Kobe and its surrounding districts were suitable particularly for the textile business. This was also Joe's business activity when he immigrated to Kobe in 1973, in the footsteps of his uncle.

