

2,800 Years: The Jews of Iran

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ORIGIN/HISTORY

The 10th century Persian historian Ibn al-Faqih (fl. 902) wrote:

"When the Jews emigrated from Jerusalem, fleeing from Nebuchadnezzar, they carried with them a sample of the water and soil of Jerusalem. They did not settle down anywhere or in any city without examining the water and the soil of each place. They did all along until they reached the city of Isfahan: There they rested, examined the water and soil and found that both resembled Jerusalem. Thereupon they settled there, cultivated the soil, raised children and grandchildren, and today the name of this settlement is Yahudia."

Jews have been in Persia since c727 BCE. They were exiled first by the Assyrians and 100 years later by the Babylonians. According to legend, the first Jew to enter Persia was Sarah bat Asher, granddaughter of Jacob. The biblical books of Isaiah, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles, and Esther contain references to the life and experiences of Jews in Persia. In the book of Ezra, Persian kings permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple: "according to the decree of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia" (Ezra 6:14).

MAJOR COMMUNITIES

Isfahan, Kashan, Shiraz, Hamadan, Kermanshah, Rasht, Urmia, Sanandaj, Babol, Damavand, Mashhad, Yazd, Bushehr, Nahavand, Tuserkan, Allayer, Borujerd, Golpayegan, Khansar.

LANGUAGES

All Iranian Jews speak Farsi (Indo-European). Each community also has a Jewish dialect, often mutually unintelligible to other communities. The dialects are grammatically and phonetically and use Hebrew loanwords and metastasis. A trade jargon, *letra'i*, is mostly Hebrew vocabulary in Persian grammar, spoken by Jewish merchants for local and intercity commerce. Jewish goldsmiths even had their own jargon, *zargari*, which included nonsense syllables. A formal version of Judeo-Persian is used in synagogue worship, and literature is written in Hebrew characters.

ANTI-JEWISH LAWS

A series of anti-Jewish laws governed life between the Jewish community and the others. One law was that if a family member converted to Islam, then s/he would be the sole inheritor of a relative's estate, bypassing the wife and children.

INTERNAL MIGRATION

When the Qājār dynasty (1794–1925) began, Teheran became the new capital and provincial Jews began migrating to it, arriving in the early 1800s. Larger numbers came in the mid-to-late 1800s following epidemics, persecution, and famine. Major migrations came from Isfahan, Hamadan, Kashan, Shiraz, as well as from smaller communities. In Tehran they lived in the Jewish neighborhood, called the *mahalleh* by everyone and *sarechal* by the community. The word ghetto is a European term. The mahalleh was not a forced ghetto, but it provided all the needed services a Jewish community requires religiously and socially. In the old days, it was considered uptown, near the bazaar. Much later, this area was far south as the city grew northwards to the mountains. European travelers including David d'Beth Hillel (1828), Benjamin II (1850), and E. Neumark (1884), estimated there were 300-400 Jewish families in Isfahan. The Bahai movement and the Christian missionary societies

became active in the Jewish *mahallehs*. A missionary school was founded in Isfahan in 1889. In 1901, Alliance Israélite Universelle established a school. Isfahan's Jewish cemetery is believed to be the burial place of Serah bat Asher ben Jacob (of Biblical note), across the road from Pir Bakran, some 20 miles south of Isfahan and a pilgrimage destination for Isfahani Jews. One of the earliest burials is from 1133 CE, and there is a large Foreign Residents section with burials in the 1500s-1600s and later. Pir Bakran is a village of silversmiths (originally from Isfahan) who were forcibly converted to Islam. In 1656, Shah Abbas II ordered the expulsion from Isfahan of all Jews because of the concept of "impurity;" they were forced to convert to Islam.

EDUCATION

The establishment of the Alliance Israelite Universelle (Universal Israelite Alliance), formed in Paris in 1860 under the aegis of Adolphe Cremieux, a French member of parliament. Alliance founded the first modern Jewish schools across Iran. In Teheran, the boys' school opened in 1898, the girls' school in 1902 with 40 girls. Students learned Persian, French, Hebrew, mathematics, Jewish religion, etc. Later the American School and the British School opened, and Jewish students (girls and boys) enrolled. Those early Alliance students became the movers and shakers of the Golden Age for the Iranian Jews. Their fluency in French (much later in English) made it easy to do business in Europe. Many Alliance students (female and male) became French teachers at the school and were called Madame and Monsieur. By 1904, Alliance had schools in Tehran, Isfahan, Hamadan, Shiraz, Sanandaj (Senneh), and Kermanshah.

POPULATION STATS

In 1904, Alliance estimated that there were at least 40,000 Jews in a population of some 10 million. In early 1976, two years before the Revolution, there were about 62,000 Jews (less than 0.25% of the total population of 35 million) and 42,000 lived in Tehran - the largest Jewish community in Asia and Africa, except for South Africa. An unofficial estimate by the Jewish Federation (*anjoman-e-kalimian*) in Tehran there were about 80 Jewish professors and lecturers – 2% of the country's 4,000 professors and lecturers -in Iranian universities and other institutions. There were about 600 Jewish physicians – 6% Iran's 10,000 physicians. Of the 150,000 students in higher learning, 4,000 were Jewish and many were at the most prestigious institutions and faculties. Additionally, numerous Jewish students were at boarding schools and colleges in the US and Europe. The literacy rate among Iranian Jewish males aged 6-50 was over 90% in 1978, while among females it was 70%. Both were much higher than the general Iranian literacy rate.

CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION

Great improvements were made in the status of Iranian Jewry; the most consequential was the freedom to work. Young men educated at Alliance entered trades like tailoring or typesetting. Those who knew French became translators or teachers. At the time Belgian, Swedish, and Americans were advisors for customs, the gendarmerie, and finance. Educated young men with foreign languages were important to government agencies. A government job, especially working with Europeans, was considered excellent. In addition to the Alliance school, Tehran's Dar al-Fonun (Polytechnic School) had near-university status and was the second most popular school for the community.

The election of the first Jewish representative to the first session of the National Consultative Assembly "*majles*" produced both anxiety and hope in the community, as the Jewish representative easily interacted with the other representatives. Tehran's Jewish community wanted greater economic opportunities to move from Sarechal to the uptown Hassanabad neighborhood. uptown Hassanabad neighborhood.

NAMES, LAWS, AND RECORDS

Although laws regarding the adoption of surnames were passed several times by the Majles (Congress), the law was not really enforced until nearly 1930 when Reza Shah Pahlavi ruled. By that time, many Jews had already adopted fixed surnames. Many families kept changing surnames for better ones. One interesting aspect was that

only one family could adopt/register a certain name in one city. Thus, we have Berukhim families from Isfahan, Kashan, and other places. When a branch of our Dardashti family moved from Isfahan c1950, the notary in Teheran refused to register them as Dardashti ("because we already have that family"). Despite their protests that they were the same family, he said they could be Dardashtian but not Dardashti. My program includes sections on family names and information on the photographs of the Tehran Jewish cemetery.

GOLDEN AGE

Some young men opened shops on Lalezar Street, considered to be Teheran's version of Paris' Champs Elysees. Others went to Europe for business opportunities. Those who knew French went to France to study dentistry and medicine, and others worked in hospitals, including the Tehran American hospital, or in pharmacies. Students went to the UK, America, and Europe, to study medicine and engineering.

DIASPORA

The first Persian Jews (from Urmiya) to the US went to Skokie, Illinois and established The Persian Synagogue, which still exists. Before the Revolution, there were smaller communities in New York, Atlanta, California, and elsewhere. During the Revolution, there were already thousands of Persian students (many were Jewish) at US (and in other countries) universities. When their families began arriving, they went first to where their children were studying, and began gravitating to Los Angeles (called Tehrangeles) and that Persian (Jewish and others) diaspora community is the largest in the world outside Iran. There are communities in New York (centered in Great Neck, Long Island); in Maryland, Atlanta, Florida, Texas. Milan, London, Paris are home to others. And the Persian Jewish community in Israel includes descendants of those who arrived in the 1800s, the 1900s, the 1950s, and those fleeing the (1978-80) Revolution.

IRAN VS PERSIA; FARSI VS PERSIAN

Persia comes from the word Pars, and was the old name used in European languages and English. However, in the Persian language, the country name has always been Iran. Today, the modern name Iran is used in almost all languages. Regarding the language, many use Farsi as the language name, while some maintain it should be called Persian. In the Persian language, it is Farsi. Yes, it is confusing. Perhaps think of it as in the Netherlands (Holland), the language is Nederlandse, but in English we say Dutch. Or in English, German is the language but is Deutsch in the German language.

NUMBERS

The Iranian Jewish community was about 90,000 to 100,000 in 1948, and about 30% were in Tehran. The founding of the State of Israel led to an increase in the emigration of Jews from Iran. During 1948- 1953, some 30,000 left Iran, many from the provinces. An interesting aspect is that from 1953-1973, around 5,000 returned to Iran. In the 1950s, Tehran was also a safe haven for thousands of Iraqi Jews fleeing unrest, and many stayed in Tehran for decades.

RESOURCES

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Cameron Azimi <https://iranian-genealogy.com/>
 An excellent website providing a comprehensive look at Iranian given names, surnames, suffixes, records, documents, oral history research and resources, and more.
 Photos of graves in the Tehran Jewish Cemetery www.beheshtieh.com
 Iranian Jewish languages and dialects <https://www.jewishlanguages.org/judeo-iranian>
 Excellent site, photos, and more on Iran's Jewish communities <https://www.7dorim.com/>
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