

Introduction

Iranian Jews in the Twenty-First Century

In 2020 the layperson would find it rather surprising that the biggest Jewish community in the Middle East outside Israel lives in what is perceived to be the archenemy of Israel and Jews: Iran.¹ The modern history of this ancient Jewish community is fascinating and dramatic, complicated and beautiful, as would be expected of a community that has been around for 2,700 years. The regional tension between Israel and Iran turned Iranian Jews into a matter of great concern, as both sides have used the existence of this community to advance their policies and agendas. However, for us to truly understand the situation of these communities, we must look beyond clichés and false narratives. We typically try to understand Iran through concepts and images provided to us by popular culture and media. Unfortunately, these sources do little justice to the reality.

Jews have lived in Iran since the Babylonian exile, some 2,700 years ago. The harsh rhetoric between Israel, the Jewish homeland, and Iran—especially since 1979—has obscured the importance of this community. Since the 1979 revolution, the well-being of this community has become an issue of great concern, and our ability to understand Iran in general—and Iranian Jews more specifically—has been harmed by the political situation and the media representation of it. We frequently draw on other historical events to make sense of what we cannot otherwise rationally explain.² Often, because of movies and books such as *Not Without My Daughter* (not about Jews, but set in Iran with Western participants) or *The Septembers of Shiraz*, Iranian

Jews are perceived to be trapped in Iran with no way out. This community, however, decides every day to remain in the country that they have called home for nearly three millennia.

Our story begins at the turn of the twentieth century with the 1906–11 Constitutional Revolution. This revolution turned Iranians, for the first time, from subjects into citizens, at least nominally. And for Iranian Jews—and other minorities—the promise was great: to make them an equal part of Iranian society. The process was not painless, and in many ways it never came to completion. In the first Majlis (the Iranian parliament), Jews (and other recognized minorities—with the exception of only the Zoroastrians) were not allowed to represent themselves and were pushed to “elect” Muslims to represent them (Afary 1996, 70). In the last years of the Qajar dynasty (r. 1795–1925) Jews tried to maximize their rights amid the promise of the constitutional period. In those years more and more of the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools opened their doors, trying to train Iranian Jews and help them develop skills that would help them achieve upward mobility on the social ladder. Alliance Israélite Universelle schools taught languages and writing, which gave the members of the community some advantages in trade, bureaucracy, and access to higher education and training in Iran and abroad. In the years between the beginning of the constitutional period and World War I, Jews came to realize that the legal barriers were not the only things standing between them and social assimilation. But with World War I brewing and the emergence of political Zionism, things started to change for Iranian Jews in unexpected ways.

The message of political Zionism first struck a chord with Jewish Iranians in 1917, following the Balfour Declaration, which promoted a Jewish homeland (Levī 1999, 510). Newly disillusioned with the outcome of the Constitutional Revolution, all of a sudden the promise of relocating to a place of their own sounded rather tempting. Iranian Jews thus established Zionist associations to teach Hebrew and handle the preparations for a mass exodus. However, shortly afterward, in 1925, with the ascendance of Reza Pahlavi as the new shah (r. 1925–41), Jews shelved their plans for relocation. Reza Shah overthrew the Qajar dynasty and sought to implement a new national project envisioning an Iranian society in which religion and religious

identity were secondary, similar to that of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the new Republic of Turkey. Reza repealed all laws that barred Jews (and other minorities) from living in certain areas, from engaging in some occupations, and from joining the army, for example. Jews became an equal part of the Iranian society. Zionism largely remained underground, though; Zionist organizations could operate openly in some fields but were banned in others altogether.

Sympathies to Zionism and different interpretations of Zionism started to split the communities in the 1920s. Shmuel Hayyim, a leader in the Jewish community, a Zionist, and the Jewish representative to the Majlis, had a harsh disagreement with another Jewish dignitary, Loqman Nahurai, who had also served as the Jewish deputy in the Majlis before and after Hayyim's tenure. Nahurai espoused the view that Jews should join the Zionist international organizations in full force, but Hayyim believed that while Zionism was overall a positive development, Iranian Jews should fight for their rights and status in Iran and not forfeit it for any messianic dream. Hayyim published a newspaper in Hebrew called *Ha-Hayyim* (Life), in which he advocated for integration, participation in political life, and the development of a national consciousness within Iran. Hayyim was eventually executed by Reza Shah on the basis of the mostly false accusation that Hayyim was complicit in an attempt to assassinate the shah. In any case, following this incident, all non-Iranian organized movements were banned from operating in Iran.

In 1941, during World War II, the Allied Armies invaded Iran. Britain and the Soviet Union occupied Iran, deposed Reza Shah, and installed his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as the new shah (r. 1941–79). During the first years, most of them while British and Soviet forces still occupied the country, political forces from the right and the left that had been banned under Reza Shah's regime were able to resume activities. We see in this period the beginning of the Tudeh Party, the Iranian Communist Party, in 1941, as well as nationalist right-wing parties (some were decisively fascist) like SUMKA and Pan-Iranist. Many Jews joined the Tudeh Party to combat social ostracism, which had become a divisive issue in the period in which Iranian national identity had started to take shape. Iranian communism differed dramatically from European communist parties especially in matters of loyalty to the Soviet Union, the importance of class

warfare, and secularism. For Jews and others, supporting the Tudeh Party meant supporting the anti-Fascist forces in Iran, fighting racism and anti-Semitism, and struggling for social equality. These motivations drove the younger generation to support this party.

At the same time we see Zionist and Israeli involvement in Jewish life in Iran. Zionist clubs and youth movements were active; however, Iranian youths did not engage Zionism as Israeli officials had hoped. Indeed, Zionism had become more complex than it had been in 1917. The twenty-five thousand Iranian Jews who had immigrated to Israel around 1948–51 were the poorest and neediest of the Iranian Jewish communities. But myriad stories at that time circulated about Jews who had emigrated from Iran to Israel and returned or wanted to return; the important thing was that Iranian Jews overall had a sober idea of what the practice of Zionism in Israel looked like in reality, rather than the ideal (unlike many of the other Middle Eastern Jews). A telling example is given in a 1951 report by Stanley Abramovitch, a director in Iran of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, one of the most important international Jewish aid organizations. Abramovitch describes one instance of Jews from Nehavand:

The letters that come from Israel dampen all spirits. The Iranian Jew is not the Halutzic [pioneer] type. The ordeals of present day life in Israel have left him discouraged, longing to return to his damp dark ghetto room, for he has been used to that room and even liked it. Food is available in Iran, and though he earned little he lived in an environment, which was not strange to him. The language, the people, the life was familiar, Israel is not. As a Persian he is looked down upon. [. . .] The letters that come back to Iran complain about the shortage of food. Nehavand received a letter and Thora [Torah] scroll from their brethren in Israel. The Nehavand Jews in Israel signed their names on this piece of scroll and in the accompanying letter they wrote that they took an oath by the Thora from which they sent a piece, that their brethren in Nehavand will not come to Israel now, anyway not until they inform them that the time is more suitable. And Nehavand is a God-forsaken place in the mountains

of Loristan, cut off from the outside world. [. . .] Yet their “Landsleit” [Yiddish for Landsmen] in Israel advise them, adjure them to remain in Nehavand. Another family was advised not to leave for Israel until their son Joseph is married. Joseph is one year old. (Abramovitch 1951)

Inevitably, after 1948 the issues of Zionism and the state of Israel became inseparable from other Jewish matters in Iran, no matter from which end of the spectrum—Zionist or non-Zionist. Zionism had become increasingly important because the shah’s grand vision for Iran entailed alliances with the West and with Israel. Israel, as a Western country, represented much of what the shah envisioned for his country. Iranian Jews, by association with Israel and by extension, became more vital and instrumental to his nation-building project than he had perhaps intended.

Community institutions such as Jewish schools had become very influential in shaping the Jewish-Iranian identity—for example, the Alliance Israélite Universelle; ORT (Obshestvo Remeslennogo i zemledelcheskogo Truda [The Society for Trades and Agricultural Labor], originally a Russian network of vocational schools); and Ittefaq (Agreement), the Jewish-Iraqi school in Tehran. These schools excelled in preparing their students for professional life in Iran, and in the 1960s Ittefaq was ranked the number one school in Iran in success rates in the national university entrance exams. Naturally, the Jewish schools were seen by many non-Jews as vehicles for social mobility. Indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s more and more non-Jews enrolled in those schools. So at that time, Iranian society was invested in cultural and social life for Jews, Jewish schools were preparing the next generation of young Iranian professionals, and at the universities Jews joined Jewish and non-Jewish student associations—some of them political (i.e., opposition), others more cultural and literary.

With the amelioration of their financial and social status, many Iranian Jews thought fondly of Israel and thought that Zionism was good—but for other people, who could not live in their homelands. This was definitely not the case for the Jews of Iran. They had become fully Iranians.

They espoused an identity that combined two or more ingredients. One could be Iranian nationalist, Communist, and Zionist all at the same time (especially before 1967). But their Zionism was not necessarily political Zionism but rather spiritual Zionism, one that is related more to the sanctity of the Land of Israel than to the political rights of Jews and others in Iran. The Jewish Agency (the political branch of the Zionist Organization) and the Israeli government realized this and between 1965 and 1969 decided to effectively end the attempt to bring Iranian Jewry en masse to Israel. Attempts to encourage Iranian *aliyah* (immigrating to Israel) had become unfruitful, just as with American Jews, Australian Jews, and South African Jews.

But Israel had a substantive presence in Iran, which also helped Iranian Jews. Israeli companies worked in Iran and had government contracts; they worked in construction, in agriculture, with the military, in industry, and more. And many times, when they needed local employees, these companies hired Iranian Jews, providing further social mobility for the local Jewish community. Regular flights between Tel Aviv and Tehran—eighteen a week on average in the 1970s—helped cultivate this intimate relationship as well.

Let us ponder for a moment the memoir of Elias Eshaqian, a teacher and principal of Alliance schools in Iran for over twenty-five years: “Iran has been my homeland [*vatan*], and Jerusalem has been the source of my belief in God and the direction of my prayers [*qiblah*]” (Ishaqyan 2008, 441). Here Eshaqian suggests yet again that many Iranian Jews differed from the Jewish Agency in their interpretation of Zionism. For Eshaqian, national Iranian identity did not interfere with his religious identity as a Jew. He proudly projected this combined identity throughout his career, which may have inspired and encouraged his students.

In the same vein, the Iranian-American journalist Roya Hakakian writes in *Journey from the Land of No* about a Passover Seder with her family in 1977:

Naturally it caused an uproar at the Seder when Father asked Uncle Ardi to read the Ha Lachma [a text from the Passover Haggadah]. Everyone burst into laughter, even before he began. He obeyed and read, but not without a touch of subversion, a bit of mischief:

“‘This is the bread of affliction’—some affliction!—‘that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt. This year we are slaves.’ May this slavery never end! ‘This year here and next year at home in Israel.’ Pardon me for not packing!”

[. . .] The family dreamed of the land of milk and honey but wanted to wake up in Tehran. [. . .]

After reciting the Ha Lachma, Uncle Ardi asked, “So, Hakakian, are your bags packed or is the flight to Jerusalem postponed for another year?” Father smiled and waved him away, assuming his question had been meant in jest. But Uncle Ardi, without the slightest hint at humor, pressed on: “Really, Hakakian, why say it? Why not leave it at ‘Love thy neighbor like thyself!’ and call off the rest?” (Hakakian 2004, 51–52, 57)

In January 1979 Mohammad Reza Pahlavi left Iran following months of demonstrations and violence. In February the exiled leader of the opposition, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, returned to Iran and declared the victory of the Iranian Revolution, and hence the end of the Iranian monarchy. Shortly thereafter, the Iranian public voted in a referendum and supported the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. What happened with the Jews of Iran during the 1979 revolution? Jews were part of the revolutionary movements too. Some of them took part because they opposed the Shah and belonged to student organizations, Tudeh, and other factions that did too. And some supported it just because they saw themselves as part of the Iranian masses revolting against an oppressive shah. In that sense, their assimilation project succeeded better than they could ever have imagined.

During the protests of the 1970s, while Tudeh Party activity had been outlawed, two Jewish activists, Haroun Parviz Yashayaei and Aziz Daneshrad, were jailed for anti-shah activity. After serving their time, they turned to political activity within the Jewish community (Menashri 1991, 360). Loyal to their leftist tendencies and religious identity, they gathered a dozen like-minded comrades and established the most significant Jewish organization in late 1970s Iran: Jami‘ ah-i rawshanfikran-i kalimi-yi Iran (The Association of Jewish Iranian Intellectuals). In

1978 they challenged the old leadership of the community and won the community elections. They coordinated Jewish participation in the anti-shah demonstrations, one of which reportedly had over twelve thousand participants.

One of the glorious operations involved the Jewish charity hospital in Tehran (later named after its founder, Dr. Ruhollah Sapir). The hospital leadership had worked with Ayatollah Sayyed Mahmud Taliqani (Khomeini's representative in Iran before the revolution) to bring wounded protestors to Jewish hospitals to get treatment, as other state hospitals were required to report to the SAVAK (the secret police) on any wounded patient. This operation was made possible not just because of people who supported the revolution but also because of shah supporters who believed in the humanitarian mission of saving people. For its role, the hospital was recognized by the revolutionary government right after the revolution, and each president since then has made a symbolic monetary contribution to the hospital.

The 1979 revolution was a watershed moment for Iran and the Iranian Jews. The thriving community of about eighty to one hundred thousand Jews had experienced continual upward mobility, but in the aftermath of the revolution there was a massive wave of emigration from Iran, mostly to the United States and Israel. What started as a revolution hoping to establish an Iranian republic turned into an Islamic revolution eventually establishing an Islamic republic. Chaos and utopia dwelled together in Iran. The hopeful revolutionaries, among them many Jews, believed that they would be able to create a national project with solid institutions that would guarantee freedom and security to all and do away with the shah's tyranny, the SAVAK, and censorship. Little did they know that the revolution would merely lead to the perfection of the methods that existed before. Tens of thousands of Iranians started leaving the country. Many of them belonged to the upper middle class. Most Iranian Jews, especially in the capital, Tehran, were of the same socioeconomic status. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that so many of them went to the same places—namely, Los Angeles, which later came to be known as Tehrangeles because of the high concentration of Iranian immigrants. Some knew that they were leaving the country for good; others believed that it was temporary. Some returned for

visits or divided their time between two or more countries. As of 2020 the permanent Jewish population of Iran had dwindled to around fifteen to twenty thousand.³

Iranian Jews had a place in Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's vision of the Iranian nation-building project. He assigned them the role of bridging Iran and the West. (He designated the same role for Christian minorities. Interestingly, Zoroastrians served instead to connect contemporary Iran to its past.) Iranian Jews in this instance joined the Tudeh Party not to spite the shah but to allow themselves to be part of the greater Iranian society, which overwhelmingly supported Tudeh. They took the role of bridging Israel and Iran but refused to adopt either identity to the exclusion of the other. They felt gratitude to the shah but greater loyalty to their history, culture, language, and society. And at the end of the day the project succeeded: they saw themselves as both fully Jewish and fully Iranian.

Right after the revolution Iran went through a tumultuous period of political, social, and cultural chaos. The period of instability included the infamous hostage crisis at the American embassy, the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), an economic crisis, international sanctions, the tensions with Israel and the United States, and, yes, religious intolerance, all of which facilitated the outgoing migration. It should be noted that Jews were not the primary victims of the Iranian regime. For various reasons, the Iranian regime became increasingly authoritarian and oppressive, and while there were both times of improvement and times of deterioration, the recognized religious minorities (Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians) fared relatively well, something we cannot say about the large Baha'i community. The recognized minorities are represented in the Majlis and can operate their places of worship, religious schools, and community clubs and institutions. Some of them we get to see in this book.

The Iran-Iraq War was the formative experience of the new Islamic republic. During the war and in its aftermath Iran experienced devastation on a previously unknown scale. Hundreds of thousands of Iranians died on the front line and as civilians, and an entire generation grew up with the trauma of this long war and with neighbors and relatives who were wounded or had died. The Jewish community (which had shrunk significantly during the war) was no exception.

Iranian Jews joined the army as soldiers or professionals (in the medical fields, for example). In 2014 the Iranian government officially recognized the role of the Jewish community and unveiled a monument commemorating the Jewish fallen soldiers from the “Imposed War” (another name for the Iran-Iraq War). The unveiling of the monument provided the Jewish community with a much-needed acknowledgment of their participation in the national story.

After the revolution Iranian Jews faced multiple challenges. The victory of the Islamic revolution and the quickly escalating conflict with Israel put the Jewish community in a fragile position at times. While early on the leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, distinguished between Judaism and Zionism by declaring the former a legitimate protected religion in Iran and the latter a political and ideological foe, Khomeini forced Iranian Jews to avoid even the appearance of any affinity with Israel or Zionism. As mentioned above, Jews are not barred from leaving the country, and despite the Western imagination seeing them perhaps in a similar position to that of Soviet Jews in the dark years of the Cold War or in a role similar to Sally Field’s in *Not Without My Daughter*, the experience of Iranian Jews is remarkably different. They have been continuously represented by a Jewish deputy in the Majlis; they face some institutional and social discrimination and exclusionary religious practices but also have the means to appeal and get justice; they can worship freely and run their own affairs and institutions, and more. In short, the everyday life of Iranian Jews is far from being black or white.

Hope and despair coexist side by side for Iranians—Iranian Jews among them. Iranian Jews remember with trauma the execution of the Jewish leader and philanthropist Habib Elghanian in 1979 or the arrest of thirteen Jews from Shiraz in 1999 on false accusations of spying for Israel. They were hopeful about the political developments in Iran and legal reforms that corrected all sorts of discrimination against Jews in education (exempting Jewish students from attending school on Shabbat/Saturday) and amended inheritance laws that gave advantages to Muslim relatives of Jews, and at the same time they feared rapid escalation in local or international tensions that could pull them down or worsen the situation for them and the country.

The photographic journey that is laid before us provides the unique opportunity to see the Jews of Iran in the twenty-first century in a wide variety of situations, mostly those that remain hidden from an average Western point of view. Photographer Hassan Sarbakhshian spent two years traveling among the Jewish communities of Iran, joining them in their holidays, family gatherings, workplaces, shops, and travels and as they lived their Iranian lives. The photos reveal the much broader story. We see the beautiful synagogues and the cemeteries with gravestones in Polish that give us a glimpse of the story of this community in the 1940s during World War II, when hundreds of thousands of Polish refugees found shelter in Iran (Sternfeld 2018). We see their shops and community institutions and can imagine what these spaces looked like when the community was five or six times larger. The photos reveal one of the most beautiful and complicated untold stories of our time. It shows that behind those giant state and regional confrontations, there are people who live in the figurative and literal middle. They are Iranian by national definition, and they are Jews by religious affiliation. Full loyalty to their country is expected, and they are often suspected of loyalty to their ancestral homeland, Israel, which is at odds with their political and chosen homeland. The gray zone is the area this photographic journey illuminates.

—LIOR B. STERNFELD

How I Met Iranian Jews

Jews no longer live in my city, Tabriz. Before the revolution some one hundred thousand Jews lived in this country, but the victory of the 1979 revolution made many of them leave and made Iranians more curious and interested in hearing stories about Jews in Iran. During the shah's time, Israel and Iran had a close relationship with a full diplomatic representation and cooperation in myriad fields. Following the revolution, the once lively Israeli embassy on Kakh Street in Tehran was closed, and the building has served as the Palestinian embassy since then.

In 1999, twenty years after Iran's revolution, I covered my first assignment when thirteen Jews in Shiraz were accused of spying for Israel. Since then I have photographed demonstrations in which Iranians burned Israeli flags. Needless to say, the Islamic Republic of Iran does not recognize Israel anymore, and the two countries have become bitter enemies.

When Iran's former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad denied the Holocaust during a conference in 2005 in Tehran, saying that the "Holocaust is a fictitious current idea" and that "the world without Israel will be safe," I knew I wanted to focus my work on the Iranian Jewish community. It was not easy, though, for an Iranian Muslim journalist to get close to their daily life in Iran. Then I met Parvaneh Vahidmanesh, who was researching the subject of Iranian Jews after the revolution. She suggested that I join her in documenting their lives. The photos in this book are the memories I have from a two-year project full of contrast and complexity, like Iranian society itself.

Every year, on the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan, Iran celebrates Ruz-e Quds (Jerusalem Day). The leaders of the 1979 revolution declared these days would show solidarity and the significance of Jerusalem to Muslims and Iranians in particular. Members of the Iranian Jewish community regularly attend the Muslim Friday prayer ceremony to show their support for and solidarity with the Palestinian people. Later, when I attended the Jewish events in Tehran, I witnessed them praying to travel to Israel.

Iranian Jews travel to Susa to go on a pilgrimage to the shrine of the prophet Daniel. Muslims run the shrine of this Jewish prophet, and there are no Jewish or Hebrew signs on his shrine. Even on his stone, a Hadith of Imam Ali, the first Shi'a imam, has been carved. When Jews attend the shrine, there is a women's section, and on that day the women's section is reserved for Jewish visitors—both men and women—for a couple of hours for the pilgrimage. The men's section of the shrine is for Muslim men.

On that trip I saw Jews reading Psalms and Muslims reading *Mafatih al-Jinan* (a popular devotional book). I also saw a Muslim woman wearing a hijab following Jews. She believed that these Jewish shrines satisfied her needs.

In another trip, to Hamedan, Jews stopped for their morning prayer in a Muslim establishment. I saw them praying toward Jerusalem under the picture of Imam Ali, where a couple of hours later Muslims would pray toward Mecca. When I visited the Jewish cemetery Beheshtieh in the Khavaran area in southeast of Tehran, I photographed a gravestone carved with a verse from the Qur'an, Muslims' holy book, that is read when a person dies: "We belong to Allah and to Him we return." This suggests a fusion of the culture of Iranian Jews and Iran's Muslim culture, combining cultural elements in a way that sometimes makes it impossible to distinguish between Jews and Muslims in Iran.

In Mashhadia Synagogue in Tehran I photographed the kosher slaughter of a cow, and I found out the ritual was very similar to the Muslim ritual slaughter of sheep or cows. The main differences are that for the meat to be kosher, it must be slaughtered toward Jerusalem, and a rabbi must be present. Also, the butcher must move the knife swiftly across the neck to kill the animal in a manner that minimizes any suffering or feeling of pain.

I photographed a young Iranian Jew who did not follow all the religious rules. Sometimes he had secretly eaten in Muslim restaurants. A young Jew in Shiraz told me he could not stop eating *chelo kebab* and *dizi*, two popular Iranian dishes.

In another trip to Shiraz, I visited a Jewish school. As the population diminished following Iran's 1979 revolution, Muslim students began using the school during weekdays, while Jewish students studying Hebrew and religious studies were there only on weekends. I photographed Jewish students playing and studying under a picture of Lebanese Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. That same day I accompanied Shahrokh Paknahad, one of the thirteen Jewish men accused of spying for Israel in 1999, who had been freed after several years in prison. Together we visited a Jewish cemetery in Shiraz, where I took a picture of Iran's national flags flying over the grave of a Jewish soldier who died in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88).

Photographing the Dr. Sapid Hospital and Charity Center in Tehran, the second-largest charity hospital in the world, was a great experience for me. This was the only place photographed for this book in which religion is not the top priority. I photographed Muslim babies

born at the hands of a Jewish doctor. I looked at a Jewish doctor whom Muslim mothers trusted to deliver their babies.

Although I had good experiences during my project, fear remained with me until I left Iran. When we delivered our book to Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to get permission to publish in Iran, the Intelligence Ministry accused us of producing propaganda for Judaism. Interrogations and threats continued until my last day in Iran inside the black Peugeot of Iran's Intelligence Ministry, or in the office of foreign media in Iran's Cultural Ministry.

One agent, Mostafavi, accused us of getting support from Israel to complete this project. Finally, Iran's Cultural Ministry banned my press card, by order of the Intelligence Ministry. I was forced to leave Iran. A book we could have published in Iran was never published and remained in a dark room of Iran's censorship system.

Now a decade after we started this project, and with the help of Lior Sternfeld, I am happy to see our book finally published for a worldwide audience. Living in exile for almost nine years has taught me how hard it was for Iranians who left their country after the 1979 revolution. Many of them passed away in exile around the globe and have never had a chance to return to Iran.

—HASSAN SARBAKHSIAN

My Story with Iranian Jews

We all have them: big family secrets that one day someone will uncover. My great-grandmother's story was one of these secrets that no one really wanted to talk about. Around 1900, a Jewish family living in the small city of Damavand, Iran, was forced to convert to Islam. They never let their children talk about their past, and the roots of their stories burrowed underground until a family member revealed the secret.

Since the day I learned our secret, I have sought to learn more about my ancestors. I entered the University of Tehran in 1998 in the field of history. In 2006, I asked my professor if, for my

MA thesis, I could work on Iranian Jews after the Islamic revolution. The professor rejected my proposal, saying it was “a very sensitive topic.” I decided to work on this topic on my own.

On a sunny spring day, I entered a handicraft shop in Tehran to buy a gift for a friend. A star of David caught my eye. A few minutes later I met my best Jewish friends, who helped me discover more about my past. Peyman, Arash, and his father welcomed me with open arms and led me to find out more about Judaism in Iran.

Later in 2007, I met Hassan Sarbakhshian, a well-known Iranian photographer who was working at the time for the Associated Press news agency. We began to work together on a project to tell the story of Jewish lives in Iran.

For two years, Hassan had observed and covered more than forty locations, ceremonies, gatherings, and events for our photo essay book. He took well over five hundred photos. I wrote the story of each photo. As I spoke with people and told them of my interest in learning more about their lives in Iran, they warmly welcomed us and agreed to help us accomplish our project. We traveled with them to holy places, we ate Passover Seder dinner with them, and we celebrated Rosh Hashanah together. We danced with them on a bus going to Hamedan, and we prayed with them at the tomb of the prophet Daniel in Susa.

During one of our assignments, we met Parviz Minaee, a spirited organizer for the Jewish communities’ trips and ceremonies who never said “no” to us. He opened locked doors no one had opened before. Sometimes it was really hard to get permission to cover a ceremony. The Iranian intelligence service never left us alone, especially since Hassan worked for an American news agency. Even some officials at Jewish associations could not totally trust us because of pressure from the Islamic government.

We nearly ended this project several times during this journey, but Farhad Aframian, the head of the cultural committee of Tehran’s Jewish association, convinced his colleagues to let us go forward. “They have collected and saved our history, which would otherwise be forgotten. We should support them,” he said.

We finished the book in mid-2008 and sent it to the Ministry of Culture to get permission to publish, but the Iranian intelligence service called both of us and claimed that the book was propaganda for Israel. We would never be able to publish the book in Iran.

In 2009, following the fraudulent presidential elections, we left Iran for the United States. Forced emigration never gave us an opportunity to publish this photographic journey in Iran. Another dream of making a movie about Iranian Jews was never realized. But we never gave up; even if only a part of this project could be seen by people, it could make a difference.

I know many Iranian Jews in Israel, the United States, and Europe may imagine their relatives in this collection. It will remind them of synagogues where they prayed every Shabbat, and they are likely to miss them when they see this book. Many of them will wipe their tears when they turn the pages, just as we do. And maybe in the near future we will all gather again in Iran.

—PARVANEH VAHIDMANESH

Notes

1. See a recent interview with Iran's chief rabbi, estimating the number of Jews living in the country in 2020 at twenty to twenty-five thousand (Goldman 2020).
2. Alliance Israélite Universelle was a French Jewish network of schools in the Middle East and North Africa aimed at “civilizing” Middle Eastern Jews and elevating their social status.
3. See this interview with Chief Rabbi of Iran Yehuda Garami in 2020: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/israel-iran-qasem-soleimani-jewish-community-coronavirus.html>.