

**ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE**

**FILM AND TV SCHOOL**

Photography

**MASTER'S THESIS**

**Iranian Jews and Their Family Photo Albums**

Memories of a Disintegrated Community

**Hassan Sarbakhshian**

Thesis advisor: Tomas Dvorak, PH.D.

Examiner:

Date of thesis defense:

Academic title granted: MgA.

Prague, 2020

**AKADEMIE MÚZICKÝCH UMĚNÍ V PRAZE**

**FILMOVÁ A TELEVIZNÍ FAULT**

Fotografie

**DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE**

**Íránští Židé a jejich rodinná fotoalba**

Vzpomínky rozpadlého společenství

**Hassan Sarbakhshian**

Vedoucí práce: Tomas Dvorak, PH.D.

Oponent práce:

Datum obhajoby:

Přidělovaný akademický titul: MgA.

Praha, 2020

## **Declaration**

I declare that I have prepared my Master's Thesis independently on the following topic:

**Iranian Jews and Their Family Photo Albums**, Memories of a Disintegrated Community

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

**Prague, date: June, 19th, 2020      Hassan Sarbakhshian**

## **Warning**

The use and public application of the findings of this thesis or any other treatment thereof are permissible only on the basis of a licensing contract, i.e. the consent of the author and of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my family, my wonderful wife Parvaneh who encouraged me to work in this subject, my children Sepehr, Sahar, Sophia, and our dog Rostam for their continual and unconditional support. Without them I would not have come this far. The patience of Sepehr and Sahar in editing and dealing with my often confusing descriptions and their appreciation of my studies have helped me to return to school after a quarter of a century.

I would like to thank the department of still photography and in particular my thesis supervisor Professor Tomas Dvorak, for his guidance, advice, and support throughout my MA research studies. It was a real privilege learning from Professor Stepanka Simlova in the past two years in FAMU.

A special thanks to the Iranian Jewish community in Iran and Israel who trust me and shared their private moments to complete this research. Especially Mr. Farhad Moradian and his lovely mother Rowshan Gabaei Moradian and his entire family. To Hila Barel and her grandfather Ya'akov (Mirza) Mishmarti, Yusef Gidanian, Janet Rothstein, Hanna Jahanforooz, and Sahar Bradaran.



## Abstract

The thesis investigates how newer generations of immigrant Iranian Jews understand their family's photo albums, all of which were captured in Iran several decades ago during the analog era. Since relocating to a new country, the majority of them can not return to their birthplace. Therefore the meaning of a family album has seen a significant change from the print era to the cyber world. The thesis aspires to find answers to relevant questions such as: What is the process of reading family photos? What is the meaning of the language of photography in a new environment? How do new generations view their old photos? Can photos be called an inheritance? And, finally, can photographs help to find family's roots and identities?

## Abstrakt

Práce zkoumá, jak novější generace imigrantských iránských Židů chápe svá rodinná fotoalba, snímky, které byly zachyceny v Íránu před několika desítkami let během analogové éry. Od přesunu do nové země se většina z nich nemůže vrátit do svého rodiště a význam rodinného alba zaznamenal významnou změnu z doby tisku do kybernetického světa. Práce se snaží najít odpovědi na relevantní otázky, jako například: Jaký je způsob čtení rodinných fotografií? Jaký je význam jazyka fotografie v novém prostředí? Jak si nová generace prohlíží své staré fotografie? Lze fotografie nazvat dědictvím? A konečně, mohou fotografie pomoci nalézt kořeny a identitu rodiny?

“Is history not simply that time when we were not born? I could read my non-existence in the clothes my mother had worn before I can remember her. There is a kind of stupefaction in seeing a familiar being dressed differently.” Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* as he searches through family photographs from before his birth.

*“In a lives shaped by exile, emigration and relocations, such as my family’s, where relatives are dispersed and relationships shattered, photographs provide perhaps even more than usual some illusion of continuity over time and space. “ Marianne Hirsch,<sup>1</sup> “Family Frames photography narrative and postmemory”*

---

<sup>1</sup> Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory, 304 pages, author: Marianne Hirsch, published by Harvard University. Press 1997

## Table of contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| - Introduction   | 6  |
| - Iranian Jews, historical-cultural-political-religious background | 9  |
| - Cultural memory and photographic albums                          | 19 |
| - Theoretical research related to the importance of family photos  | 30 |
| - Chapters devoted to my own research and analysis                 | 36 |
| - Conclusion   | 51 |
| - Notes  | 62 |

Keywords: Iran, Jews, Family photos, immigrate

## Introduction

### Jews In Iran: A Disintegrated Community

In May 2019, while recording with my GoPro camera, my fellow peers from FAMU and I left the main building at Ben Gurion Tel Aviv airport searching for a means of public transportation. We had made the trip to Israel to attend the Musrara festival in Jerusalem. We finally decided to give up and catch a taxi to the hostel. An older taxi driver was waiting and immediately noticed us saying: “Welcome to Israel! I wish you all the best. Where are you from?” he said, pointing at me. I answered: “From Iran!”. To which he exclaimed with a big "NO!" making everyone laugh and insisting if I was joking or not. Eventually, we took in his taxi to the hostel while he gave us a customary tour as a proud Israeli. You may be wondering about the taxi driver's reaction when he found out about my nationality. There is a very simple explanation, it's because of Iran and Israel's ongoing conflict for the past 41 years. However, these conflicts are largely triggered by the politicians of both countries. Of course, after four decades of recurred disputes, Iranian and Israeli citizens have started to support the previously mentioned views as their own. I aspire to have a deeper understanding of this problem by examining its context and history. It began just three days after Iran's 1979 revolution, the exact day Palestine's previous leader, Yaseer Arafat arrived in Tehran to meet Ayatollah Khomeini; approximately one thousand Iranian Jews fled the country. Since then the Jewish population in Iran has been reduced to less than a quarter of the 80,000 that it used to be before 1979. Jews lived under Muslim rule for nearly 1,400 years in Iran, but that's only half of their history in the land of Persia. The other half goes back to the time when they entered Iran 2,700 years ago during the reign of king Cyrus the Great. The first Jews who were exiled from Jerusalem to Babylonia settled in the Persian sphere. In the seventh century CE, Muslims conquered Persia. In the aftermath of the Muslim-Arab conquest, the lives of Iranian Jews became progressively difficult, especially following the institution of Shiite Islam as the state religion in the sixteenth century. But, “A major turning point for Iran and its Jewish population was the establishment of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736) by Shah Isma'il I, who unified Iran and instituted Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion around 1501.”<sup>2</sup> Habib Levy, the author of “The Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran” whose book was first published in Persian in 1960 dedicates second volume of his book to the “future descendants of Israel who have not seen the effects of dispersal.”<sup>3</sup> Levy did not know two decades later these very future descendants will witness a worse situation of dispersal of Jews in Iran.

---

<sup>2</sup> Lior B. Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2019, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> <http://habiblevy.com/english.html>

“After Iran’s revolution was flaming in 1979, about 60% of Iranian Jews immigrated from the country and they roamed the Middle East and the world.”<sup>4</sup> This was a motivation for Hooman Sarshar to investigate in his compiled book “Esther’s Children” published in Los Angeles in 2002. Sarshar wanted to know how one of the oldest religious minorities in Iran was forgotten in the Middle East? In a new environment and new societies, these immigrants tried to adapt themselves. Meanwhile, Persian readers open the translated book of “Esther’s Children” to find its incipit the Islamic phrase bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmī (بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ) "*in the name of God the merciful the compassionate*" which does not exist in the original version which was written in English.<sup>5</sup>

Naser Pourpirar, the publisher of the Persian translated version of Esther’s Children writes a full page in the introduction against the Iranian Jewish people, which was published in Iran in 2005. In other words, the Persian version of the book tries to give readers an official state narration from the history of Jews in Iran, maybe that was the reason this book had permission to be published in Iran. Criticizing the original book which had been written to give a big picture of the Iranian Jewish society in the 20th century. The author concludes in the preface that Esther's legacy was for the Jews of Iran to appear and lie for protection in a non-Jewish society so they could worship the Jewish God in secret. The biblical story of Esther takes place in Shushan (which is identified with present-day Hamadan in Iran), home to a large Jewish community. It relates that Esther, a beautiful young Jewish woman, is chosen to marry the powerful King Ahasuerus. Advised by her wise cousin and guardian, Mordechai, Esther initially keeps her faith a secret from the king. In the course of the story, Esther, working with Mordechai, manages to thwart the plans of Haman, the king’s advisor, to exterminate the Jewish community. She does so at great risk to herself and by revealing her faith to Ahasuerus. The Jewish festival of Purim commemorates these events.<sup>6</sup>

The story of Iranian Jews, who know themselves Iranian in all aspects continues; though because of their immigration, the population of this old Iranian minority decreases day after day. The way they have chosen to protect their Iranian-Jewish heritage is both considerable and admirable. Although the problem of denying the Holocaust,<sup>7</sup> the humiliation of Jewish symbols and beliefs, and the continued discrimination towards the minority group continues in Iran. After the 1979 revolution in Iran, Jews faced yet another force to leave their homeland once again. Many left behind loved ones in Iran, unable to say goodbye to them. It seems the Jewish minority in Iran never achieved freedom, or in other words, they lived between fear and freedom. This reminds

---

<sup>4</sup> Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, p7

<sup>5</sup> Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, p1

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.fowler.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/LightAndShadows\\_CRU.pdf](https://www.fowler.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/LightAndShadows_CRU.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran/ahmadinejad-says-holocaust-a-lie-israel-has-no-future-idUSTRE58H17S20090918>

me of the words by Hubertus von Amelunxen about Vilem Flusser who lost his mother and his sister in Auschwitz and was forced to leave Prague. Hubertus von Amelunxen says “In London in 1940, as he says in one essay, 'in this - by continental standards - somewhat inscrutable England', 'freed' from Prague by having been forced to leave, nonetheless aware of 'the coming dislocation of humanity', he formulated the basic question of his writing: Changing the question 'free from what?' into 'free for what?'; this change that occurs when freedom has been achieved has accompanied me on my migrations like a basso continuo. This is what we are like, those of us who are nomads, who come out of the collapse of a settled way of life.”<sup>8</sup>

After 1979, once again Jews in Iran witnessed the collapse of their wishes for a better future and living free in the land of Persia. Living in Islamic society for centuries, taught them ways to adapt to rules and cultural matters. Some of them have chosen Islamic names for their children to avoid future religious, economic and employment problems. Since conservative Muslim clerics banned Shiia Muslims from playing or listening to music, Jews became professional experts in Iranian classic music as well as wine production.

Lior B. Sternfeld explains in his book<sup>9</sup>, "The intense relations between Iran and Israel since 1979 has given prominence to false dichotomies and wrong assumptions instead of facts. Relatively few people realize that in the Middle East, Iran's Jewish population is second in size only to that of Israel.'

For the sake of their safety, peace of mind, and family these Iranian Jews decided to remain distant from the political conflict and oppression that followed. Only a few representatives in parliament and their heads of the community are involved in government politics. However, politics in this context is to support the government, to corroborate their policy about Israel and not participate in any political campaign or party. During my trip to Israel, I was able to photograph and interview Iranian-Israelis who have been displaced to Israel. I wanted to ask those who were born in Iran but had been living in Israel for decades, where they feel is their true homeland? Iran or Israel? I got a variety of answers but for the most part, similar to those who came before them and migrated from Iran to Israel during 1979, keep their family photos from the old days in Iran. I have been collecting and analyzing such photos from each person I photographed in Israel. I believe by examining these old photos, it is possible to uncover more details and help clarify the past and present life of Iranian Jewish immigrants. I hope to support my research using some of the most relevant photography and philosophical theories to date.

---

<sup>8</sup> Vilém Flusser, 'Wohnung beziehen in der Heimatlosigkeit' (Finding a Home in Homelessness), in *Von der Freiheit des Migranten: Einsprüche gegen den Nationalismus* (On the Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism) (Mannheim, 1994), p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Lior B. Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2019, p1

## **Iranian Jews, historical-cultural-political-religious background**

In Iran, it is common to use the word “Kalimi” when referring to a Jew, stemming from the Quran (the holy book for Muslims) referring to Prophet Moses as “Kalim-ollah”. “Yahudi” and “Johud” are among other names used when referring to Jews in Iran. The word “Johud” was very common in some areas, and sometimes, it was only used to humiliate the Jewish people.

In Persian culture, there are many proverbs made considering the numerous behaviors attributed to Jews, most of which people used to humiliate the minority group. Some examples range from how the accumulation of wealth by Jews and their attention to economic affairs is said to cause people to relate to a person who is very cautious about financial affairs to a Jew. Or for example, in the Persian language, a coward who fears everything is called a Jew who hasn't seen any bleeding in his life, or dark and untidy houses are compared to a Jew's house. In the past, the expressions "I'll give you to a Jew" or "a Jew will come and eat you" were used to frighten children.

During the first Pahlavi period (1925-1941) and then in the son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's period (1941-1979) the forming of the new government of Israel led Iranian Jews to a unique situation. There was a decline in the number of such humiliating titles and the rate of historical racist passions between Iranian people, and Jews became known as an elite class in Iran. However after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the twelve Imams Shiite jurisprudence became powerful again after the fall of the Shah. The Shiite jurists' main belief consisted of a very close relationship between religion and politics, gaining all the pillars of power. The unequal social conditions of Safavid and Qajar periods could never rule the nation again, and in spite of the existing discriminations in civic and juridical rights between Muslims and non-Muslims in Islamic Iran, the political hostility between Iran and Israel. Hostilities led to the military occupation of the Israel Embassy in Iran which also led to it being converted to the Palestine Embassy. Talks of wiping Israel from the face of the world, arresting the Jews as Israeli spies and high ranking Iranian government officials denying the Holocaust.

Now, with their population of twenty-five thousand persons, Iranian Jews make a cohesive community that has the most sensitive conditions of being a minority. Their ethnic and religious aspects are linked to Israel society and Jerusalem (Beit ol-moqaddas), while their nationality has originated in Iran and is related to the Islamic Republic, the most important enemy of Israel and the U.S., so the Jews who stay in Iran in spite of living in such conditions, their problems and the existing discriminations, have been paid attention by all the mass media and the press. They are the people, whose religious symbol, the star of David is put under pedestrians' feet in Palestine Square, Tehran, while they have a member in the Islamic Consultative Assembly. This is a paradox that can only be understood by studying their national affections.

## **Ancient Jews in Iran?**

The first documented story about the presence of the Jewish nation in Iran goes back to 741-749 or 732 BC when around 60000 Bani-Israeli prisoners - who had been taken as the king of Assyria had attacked them – were moved to Gilad, Damavand in Iran.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that from 732 BC until the crowning of Cyrus to the royal throne and the advent of ancient Persian religions, the religion of those immigrated prisoners had been known in the northern parts of Iran. The well-known historic stories and the fact that Cyrus respected the Jewish nation shows he had sufficient knowledge about Jews and Judaism as a religion. Cyrus The Great is introduced in the Bible as a falcon, a messenger from God, and commissioned to spread justice around the world.<sup>11</sup> Insisting on his divine mission in the Bible to build Jehovah a house in Jerusalem is the reason behind calling him Cyrus the Messiah and the savior.

During ancient Iran, Iranians who ruled the country had a peaceful relationship with the Jews because of mutual interests making this period a prosperous period for Iranian Jews. However, the Arabs' attack on Iran ended the ancient period and a chapter of Iranian emperors in Iran. After Arabs occupied the cities of Iran, the conditions changed according to the new system's interests, ending the period of demarcating borders between Zoroastrians (common Iranians) and non-Zoroastrians. The process of Iran's adaptation to Islam and its reasons are much too lengthy to discuss here, but it seems that all Iranians who lived inside the borders of Iran had the same treatment in the views of the new religion's followers. All of them were called non-Muslims, pagans, and infidels. The rules issued by Islamic Caliphs against Iranians increased the pressures on the Jewish society who should now be the tributaries to the Islamic government. There are no precise statistics or even documented historical data on Iranian Jews converting to Islam during this period, but as other Iranians, some definitely adopted Islam to escape pressure and discrimination.

After Arabs arrived in Iran and Islam conquered the country, the living, cultural and religious traditions completely changed for Iranians. Books from this period talk about the imposition of heavy taxes on non-Muslims. Islamic Caliphs' policy about the believers of other religions was to accept *jeziah* (a poll tax paid by non-Muslims to a Muslim government) in lieu of keeping their lives, estates and freedom for choosing their religion.

---

<sup>10</sup> Levy, Habib, Judah Brokheim bookstore, Tehran 1955, the first volume, page 88

<sup>11</sup> The Old Testament, the book of Isaiah, chapters 41 and 42



The first two hundred years of the presence of Arabs in Iran, that is famously known as two centuries of silence by Iranians living through years of contempt, discrimination, and injustice done by Bani Umayyah to non-Arabs.

In 941 AC, the Arab tourist, Ibn-e Hooghel left Baghdad and started a long trip to learn more about the eastern nations. The documented mingling of the Jewish and Muslim population in Dar ol-Islam, especially in eastern Iran, is a sign of the two religions' presence in that region. Ibn-e Hooghel described Isfahan as follows:

"Isfahan is divided between two parts, one is called Judea and the other one is called a township, and the distance between them is 2 miles. The two parts are different from each other and each one has a pulpit. Judea is two times bigger than township and its buildings are built with clay. Both parts are larger, bigger, more high-yield and their estates, population, trade, traffic of travelers, and agricultural produce are more than those of all the cities in the mountains." <sup>12</sup>

Benjamin Tudela<sup>13</sup>, who traveled in the 12th century from Sarago to Greece, Palestine, and Iran (during the king Sanger's rule), visited most of the cities in which the Jews lived and offered a precise statistic on his co-religionists; he wrote that their population in Iran was one million and two hundred persons. He reconnoitered 20,000 Jews in Rudbar; most of them were scientists and rich people; 40,000 Jews in Nahavand; 30,000 Jews in Hamedan, 15,000 Jews in Isfahan and 10,000 Jews in Shiraz.

At the time, Iranian Jews were doing trade, and in regions such as Kurdistan and Damavand, they were doing agriculture and livestock breeding. Also during the Abbasid period, some special taverns similar to the modern bars that were often managed by the Jews. The Jews and the Christians were the wine sellers of the time.<sup>14</sup>

The first independent Iranian rulers of Islamic Iran, Safavid kings decided Shiite as Iranian official religion and took a big step for identifying the religion as one of the decisive factors of national identity. This religious-governmental movement pressurized other Islamic sects and religious minorities in Iran and started to destroy them. The situation of the Jews became critical soon.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibn-e Hughes, the book of travels, translated by Jafar Shoar, Amirkabir institute, 1987

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin of Tudela was a medieval Jewish traveler who visited Europe, Asia, and Africa in the 12th-century

<sup>14</sup> Philip Hatti, The history of Arabs, translated by Abulqasem Payandeh, page 427

During Shah Abbas I's rule, an anti-Jewish movement was formed in Iran that according to historical documents, was influenced by anti-Jewish Europeans who had a permanent presence in Iran at the time. There are many documents recorded by Jews and European tourists about the disordered situation of Iranian Jews at the time.

Change of religion only occurred because of the permanent pressures on that nation. Babai ibn-e Lotf described these pressures in his book, "The Anosies"<sup>15</sup>. Safavid government was under Shiite clergies' influence and was led by them. Baha ol-Din Ameli (Sheikh Bahayi) in his jurisprudential book, "Jame-e Abbasi" which was dedicated to Shah Abbas I, announced that the blood-money for ordinary people was 2400 Dirhams and for a Jew was 400 Dirhams. According to this rule, if a person killed a Jew, he should give the Jew's family only a cup of wheat as his blood-money. During this dark period, many Jews in Isfahan adopted Islam, due to growing religious discrimination and the interference of European missionaries in Iran.

It was during this period that Judaism, Christianity, and other religions were called unclean religions according to Shiite jurisprudence. During this period if a Jew adopted Islam, Islamic law he inherited all of his Jewish family's estates and wealth.

Conflicts among the Jewish community caused pressures on the Jewish community to increase as a result. The avarice of some Jewish patriarchs led the minority to be disordered and allowed the Islamic society to humiliate and expel the Jews, continuing the domination of its totalitarian view until the end of the Qajar period. Since back then, Iranian Jews weren't allowed to put on new clothes or eat fresh fruits, they started to take on insignificant jobs. This is the reason for the Iranian view considering the Jews as the people clothed in rags who are known for jobs such as antique dealing and peddling and attributes such as stinginess and money-loving. The view formed when they started to live in the ghettos away from the society that expelled them from their normal lives.

The Jews became more limited according to the following laws issued by Islamic theologians during the Safavid period. Allameh Mohammad Taghi Majlesi (1627-1699) issued some laws on them that didn't seem strange after the conditions of the Shah Abbas period. Majlesi announced that if a Jew adopted Islam, he would inherit all his family's estate and heritage. He also ruled that witnessing by a Jew should be rejected. Jewish women were obligated to uncover their faces in the streets to be recognizable from Muslim women. A Jew wasn't allowed to wear his aba (special cloth) and could only put it under his armpit. The Jews weren't allowed to cut their beard with scissors and have long hair, so they had to shave their head. Their wedding ceremonies

---

<sup>15</sup>Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrmaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, 2005, page 70

should be held in secret. They weren't allowed to build beautiful synagogues, pray loudly, and come out of their homes after sunset.<sup>16</sup>

The Jews gradually accepted the situation, living in the ghettos, dirty districts, with no facilities and away from their fellow Iranians, made to live as islanders. The fear of losing their lives, life earnings, and even their wives began to build an inner fear among them generation after generation. They could continue living only with this fear because bravery and boldness meant losing their lives, wealth and wives. The situation became worse and worse during the following periods, especially the Qajar period.

Qajar period was the height of disgrace throughout the history of Iran; superstitions pulled the society back, and the incompetent Qajar government could not confront poverty, ignorance, and cumbersome traditions. All of which helped Iran's society continue in the wrong direction. Fat'h Ali Shah Qajar (1834 AC) treated Iranian Jews worse than any other ruler. In 1863, German telegraphist and photographer Ernst Holtzer (1835-1911) came to Iran and wrote a book about his trip. He described Iranian Jews as follows:

"The Jews are allowed to make wine and sell it. These winemakers and wine sellers are called Shireh-chi. They don't cause any problems and political conflicts for the Iran government because no foreign government helps them. Most of the entrances of their houses are narrow and the houses have some corridors with short doors. The level of the yard at most of the old houses is lower than the level of the alley. The Jews' clothes are similar to other people's, but they shall put a sign on their clothes, otherwise, they will be punished. They are not allowed to wear an aba and fur cap as other Iranians do. The color of their clothes shall not be white or green and when it is rainy, they are not allowed to go out of their houses. In the city Yazd, women are not allowed to wear blue chador and shall wear white chador. They can not be shopkeepers or own a store. The synagogues are often built underground and they get light from the ceiling. They pay the government a yearly tax of 800 Tomans (Iran's currency). Most of the Jews in Isfahan are physicians and in Shiraz, tradesmen."<sup>17</sup>

During the Persian Constitutional Revolution, the (1905-1911) movement emphasized religious freedom and freedom for minorities resulting in the formation of the Consultative Assembly and the establishment of the freedom of some cases that had been unbelievable in Iranian society. At first, the acts by some people such as Sheikh Fazlollah Noori made the equalitarian movement slow in the case of the equality of Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Muslims. Sheikh Fazlollah Noori in his treatise, "The sanctity of Constitutionalism" wrote to people who considered the minorities as equals to Muslims: "O knave! O cuckold! Look that the Prophet has laid down

---

<sup>16</sup> Levy, Habib, History of Iranian Jews, the third volume, Judah Barokhim publications, Tehran, 1960, pages 405-409

<sup>17</sup> Holster, Ernest, One hundred and thirteen years ago, translated by Mohammad Asemi, Ministry of culture and arts, page 244

honor for you and has given you superiority, but you yourself divest yourself of superiority and say: I shall be equal to and brother with a Zoroastrian, a Christian, and a Jew."<sup>18</sup>

The membership of religious minorities in social, cultural and political organizations was a clear sign of progress in a society where once a Jew met a Muslim in the street, he had to pass from the corner, and the Jew should be silent in the conflicts and accept everything the Muslim said. One of the organizations that trained the next nationalists of Reza Shah's period, (1875-1944) "Iran-e No" newspaper wrote in its 134th issue:

"From today, there is no Muslim, nor Zoroastrian, no Armenian, no Jew, no Persian, no Turk, but only an Iranian in Iran, and we are a nation."<sup>19</sup>

The permanent pressures on the Jews from the prejudiced people and sixth Qajar king Mohammad Ali Shah's companions caused the Jews in all parts of the country to announce in a symbolic act to repeal the pressures that they disagreed with Constitutionality. At the time, their slogan was as follows: "We are Moses' nation; we don't want Constitutionality under Muslims' rule."

After that Iran's Constitutionalists won and conquered Tehran. Jews having taken no part in any acts in fear of the numerous attacks Muslims committed on their districts, started cleaning their districts with the assistance of the Constitutionalists and young Jews. At the time, the Jews could purchase some shops on Lalehzar Street, Tehran and some of them went to France to study physics.<sup>20</sup>

Reza Shah tried to form a united and cohesive Iranian society on the basis of a Nationalist Ideology, hoping to have a powerful and united government. The deputy of the Jews in the National Consultative Assembly before and after Reza Shah's period, Loqman Nehorai succeeded in preventing discriminations against the Jews. Nullification of Jeziah law prevented the encroaching done by people who adopted Islam in a Jew family and solved the problem of Jews who wanted to marry and divorce at the official offices specified for Jews. Those trying to get permissions such as leave of absence from the military on Jewish religious holidays are some examples of acts Iranian Jews owe him.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Noori, Sheikh Fazlollah, "The sanctity of Constitutionalism" from the book "The treatises of Constitutionalism", compiled by Gholam Hossein Zargari Nejad, page 126

<sup>19</sup> Iran-e No, 134th issue, Safar of 1328, page 1

<sup>20</sup> Levy, Habib, the History of Iranian Jews, the third volume, page 846

<sup>21</sup> Levy, Habib, the History of Iranian Jews, the third volume, pages 854 to 859

In 1922, following the migration of the Jews to Palestine, the Iranian government announced: "Only people among the Jews that can travel abroad are those who want to go on a pilgrimage or trade and haven't left their interests. To prove it, they shall introduce a credible guarantor."<sup>22</sup> Under the newly-established modern outlook in Iran, supporting the Jews' universal efforts for rebuilding their own society, the Jews tried to establish Hebrew classes and cultural societies. So, the day in which the "Zionist Organization" had been established was celebrated in Iran. In 1919 AC, the First Congress of Iranian Zionists was held. Azizollah Naeem, the leader of Iran Zionist Organization translated the book "History of Zionism movement" in 1920, which had an important role in stabilizing their movement in Iran. Containing a section on the chief of women in the Zionism society, the book by Habib Levy says that the movement had been a stabilized and powerful movement between the Jews.

The 1917 announcement, Balfour <sup>23</sup>was considered a great success for Jews around the world and led to some powerful influences in Iran that tended to the migration of Iranian Jews to Israel. However, the documents that remain from that period show that though the Iranian government opposed this immigration at first, they gradually began to help Jews looking to go abroad. According to the Iranian consulate in Palestine, Iranian Jews in Israel asked for monetary help from the Iranian government to establish courses to teach the Persian language. They also expressed interest in repairing the tombs of Esther, Mardochai, and the Prophet Daniel in Iran.<sup>24</sup> However, because of a shortage in budget and foreign money the Iranian government did not allocate Persian language lecturers to Jewish universities but did allow the Jews to repair the tombs of Esther, Mardochai, and the Prophet Daniel.

Habib Levy, author of "The Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran", described Pahlavi I period in his book as follows:

"In the happy era of Reza Shah, the Great, because of the freedom of Jews and the existing safety and comfort and trade development in Iran, not only many Muslims but also many of the Jews got rich. The rich men and even many middle-class people got out of Jewish districts and built many buildings in newly-established streets in Tehran and helped to develop the city and increase their comforts. On the other hand, because the capital city was developing and the laws on trades emphasized the obligation of the tradesmen's presence in Tehran, many of the Jews in townships, especially Kashan and Hamedan went to Tehran. So, the number of Jews in Tehran

---

<sup>22</sup>Immigration of Iranian Jews to Palestine, compiled by Marzieh Yazdani, Iran Organization of National Documents, 1995, Document no. 4 (code 293005936)

<sup>23</sup> In 1917, just before World War I ended, Britain minister of foreign affairs had written in a letter to British rich Jew, Rochild, "My Dear Lord Rochild, I am glad to clearly notify you - under the name of the Royal Government of United Kingdom - of the following good news, in reference to the request from Zionism community received in the ministry and agreed. The Royal Government of the United Kingdom has a special view about the establishment of a national country of Jews in Palestine. Therefore, we will do our best to reach this goal and facilitate it soon."

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Education, Endowments, and Handicrafts, Department of higher education, no. 2731/14033 date: 1317/4/29 (document N 125002/148)

that had been three thousand people in the last years of Nasser al-Din Shah, reached twenty thousand persons." <sup>25</sup>

During the Pahlavi, I period, many European schools were closed in Iran and the others were obligated to teach the Persian language. At the time, the name of Alliance schools changed to "Ettehad" schools. An Iranian uniform was created for all races, nationalities, and religions in Iran and led to the appearance of Jews not to differ from Muslims anymore. This was when Iranian Jews were allowed to trade in the market and participate in the cultural centers and social gatherings, all of which helped decrease the existing stigma around them. For the Jews, Reza Shah's period was a time to leave the ghettos and live in other districts.

Following this, the Jeziah law was nullified. Allowing Iranian Jews to be freely employed as government officials alongside their fellow Muslim Iranians. Understanding the new law and coming to terms with the change proved to be difficult for the Iranian people. From a cultural aspect, a Jew had always been considered as an unclean, Johud, usurer, and evil person. Although it was a sudden change, this allowed Jews to deal in the same social affairs as fellow Iranians and start living a normal, peaceful life. However, years of societal disparity towards Jews in Iran continues to have them choose to stay encroached in small cities, while anti-Jewish ideologies remained in the public's mind for a long time.

During the period, though Reza Shah had a tendency to lean towards Nazism, He never infringed on Iranian Jews. It is interesting to note that European Jewish refugees, most of whom included Polish women and children resided in Iran. The Poles gradually came back to the Promised Land or their homeland; some of them stayed in Iran, got married, and passed on later in Iran. Their tombs rest in Beheshtieh cemetery, Tehran.

At first, the Poles who became famous as "Tehran Kids" had a population of about three thousand and were led by General Veladislav Andreas, a dependent aiming to liberate the army of Poland. It was around these years (1947) that the Alliance Israelite Universelle succeeded to open a representative office in Tehran, managed by Moses Isay, just a year before the establishment of the Israeli government in Palestine. According to Tehran Savak<sup>26</sup> documents dated 1958, in addition to systematizing the situation of Tehran Kids; the Alliance's next act was to help Jews looking to immigrate to Israel. The document reads as follows:

"Alliance Israelite Universelle has a public health department for medical examining and curing of the Jew immigrants who come from townships to Tehran. It has been established in the Jews' Beheshtieh district and has departments of inner diseases and ophthalmology and several nurses. The public health department is managed by Dr. Kohani who spends all his time on Alliance and the immigrants. He has two offices on Haj Sheikh Hadi and Cyrus Streets.

---

<sup>25</sup>Levy, Habib, the History of Iranian Jews, the third volume, pages 854 to 964

<sup>26</sup>SAVAK was the secret police, domestic security and intelligence service in Iran during the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty.

All Jew immigrants who are going to be dispatched to Israel will be examined completely and when it is proved that they are physically and mentally healthy, they will be dispatched to Israel. The duty of Alliance is to establish societies, hold conferences, prepare all the facilities, contact with Iranian agents and dispatch agents to the townships of Iran to promote the immigration and make the new Iranian Jew families (especially families with five to ten members) ready to be dispatched to Israel."<sup>27</sup>

The Pahlavi (I & II) periods were the golden era for Iranian Jews. During the Pahlavi II period, because of the establishment of the Israeli government, the situation of Iranian Jews continued to improve day after day. In the 1970s, only 10 percent of Iranian Jews were living under the poverty line; 80 percent were from the middle class and 10 percent were from the upper class. Although they formed a very low percentage of Iran's population in 1979, 2 out of the 18 members of the Academy of Science, 80 of 4000 university professors, and 600 of 10000 physicians in Iran were Jewish.

Iranian people called the Shah a Jew himself or sometimes a friend of the Jews because of his steps in officially recognizing Israel's government. Contrary to neighboring Arabian governments' desires, he also sold oil to Israel at a low price. In 1979, 80,000 Jews still lived in Iran, but following the Islamic revolution, their immigration from Iran spiked so much that merely months after the Islamic revolution, their population was about 20,000 in Iran.

During the mid and late 1980s, the population of Iranian Jews was estimated to be around 20,000 to 30,000 persons. In the mid-1990s, it reached about 35,000 people with a current population of about 30,000 Jews with most of them living in Tehran. In spite of the big immigration that occurred during recent years, the population of Jews in Iran remains the largest than any other Islamic country.

Following the Islamic Revolution, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini's anti-Israel slogans affected the lives of Iranian Jews immensely. Some Jews were arrested and subject to serving prison sentences. A powerful and wealthy Iranian Jew Habib Alghanian, whose wealth was dispersed between Iran and Israel, was arrested and executed on charges of Spying on the 19th of May, 1981. In his speeches, Ayatollah Khomeini called Israel a "bastard" and encouraged the Islamic world to confront this "little devil". He believed that if every Muslim poured a pail of water on Israel, there would not be an Israel anymore. Jews who had lived in Iran for centuries as a conservative nation, returned to the hidden inner layers of society, with their immigration starting an upward trend again.

Years after Mohammad Khatami's presidency ended (in office 1997-2005), where he repeatedly emphasized on deleting Israel from the world map, the fundamentalist president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (in office 2005-2013) caused the world to pay attention to a small

---

<sup>27</sup> Savak document no. 205-3-2, dated (1958) 1337/1/28, Sāzemān-e Ettelā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar, literally "National Organization for Security and Intelligence") was the secret police, domestic security and intelligence service in Iran during the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty.

society of Iranian Jews. The holding of international conferences focused on portraying the Holocaust<sup>28</sup> as a myth that caused the Jews who opposed Zionism and western media to come to Iran and pay attention to the problem of Zionism. The head of Jews' society at the time, Haroon Yashayayi announced the Jewish society's protest about the denying of the Holocaust through a letter dated 17th of Feb. 2006 to President Ahmadinejad:

"The programs broadcasted by Iran's state TV and some other mass media that emphasize every day on that the massacre of Jews by Nazis of Hitler government (Holocaust) was a fable and challenge with one of the most obvious and saddest human events in the 20th century has caused the world's astonishment and the small Jewish society in Iran fear and worry."

According to international media, in the winter of 2008, forty Iranian Jews jointly immigrated to Israel. This news caused a new wave of media attention from around the world highlighting the fact that Iranian Jews were living under pressure and discrimination.

---

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/dec/14/iran.secondworldwar>



## Cultural memory and photographic albums

*"Recently, photography has become almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing-which means that, like every mass art form, photography is not practiced by most people as an art. It is mainly a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power."* Susan Sontag<sup>29</sup>

Nearly two centuries ago Jews in Iran were among the people who used the new medium of the 19th century for documenting their daily life. Jews in Iran also served as subjects to professional photographers from the beginning of the medium's invention. One of the famous photographers from the last century was Antoin Sevruguin<sup>30</sup>, living between 1870s-1928. Thanks to the inventors of photography, we can study and learn from photos that remind us of the past (Even if Judaism rejects images). Roland Barthes<sup>31</sup> mentioned his own experience looking at his mother's old photo and writes: "And no more than I would reduce my family to the Family, would I reduce my mother to the Mother. Reading certain general studies, I saw that they might apply quite convincingly to my situation: commenting on Freud (*Moses and Monotheism*), J.J. Goux<sup>32</sup> explains that Judaism rejected the image in order to protect itself from the risk of worshipping the Mother; and that Christianity, by making possible the representation of the maternal feminine transcended the rigor of the Law for the sake of the Image-Repertoire. Although growing up in a religion-without-images where the Mother is not worshipped (Protestantism) but doubtless formed culturally by Catholic art, when I confronted the Winter Garden Photograph I gave myself up to the Image, to the Image-Repertoire. Thus I could understand my generality; but having understood it, invincibly I escaped from it. In the Mother, there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother."<sup>33</sup>

I want to expand my questions which I mentioned at the beginning of my thesis and with my limited knowledge try to find responses via analyzing family photos of the Iranian Jewish minority. In my thesis, I wrote a couple of questions and at the beginning, I mentioned: what is the process of reading family photos? But after conducting my research, first, let's see what we expect from photography?

Susan Sontag writes<sup>34</sup>: "To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, and mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."

---

<sup>29</sup> On Photography, Author Susan Sontag, publisher: Picador, page 8

<sup>30</sup> <https://asia.si.edu/research/iran-in-photographs/the-collections/myron-bement-smith-collection-up/>

<sup>31</sup> Roland Gérard Barthes 1915-1980 was a French literary theorist, philosopher, critic, and semiotician.

<sup>32</sup> Les travaux d'Oedipe, d'après Oedipe philosophe" de Jean-Joseph Goux", Editions L'Harmattan (April 1, 1997)

<sup>33</sup> Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida. New York: Hill & Wang 1980, page 74

<sup>34</sup> On Photography, Author Susan Sontag, publisher: Picador, page 15

Houman Sarshar<sup>35</sup> mentioned the importance of pictures in his book<sup>36</sup>: "The photos illustrate all the subtleties and complexities that are beyond words, and I have tried to give them a clearer and more authentic portrait of the Iranian Jews, these children of Esther."

In meanwhile Roland Barthes writes<sup>37</sup>: "what I am seeking in the photograph taken of me (the "intention" according to which I look at it) is Death: Death is the eidos of that Photograph. Hence, strangely, the only thing that I tolerate, that I link, that is familiar to me when I am photographed, is the sound of the camera. For me, the Photographer's organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens, to the metallic shifting of the plates (when the camera still has such things).

Hirsch emphasized that the reason for her to write her book is about the process of reading family photographs."The missing pictures of my grandmother have stayed with me as pointed signifiers of loss...I have written this book in response to the disappearance of those photographs. This book is an attempt to trace the process of transformation, the process of reading family photographs. "*Marianne Hirsch*<sup>38</sup>, "*Family Frames photography narrative and postmemory*"

The fascinating thing about photography is about personal impressions of everyone when they are watching photos and what they expected from photographs. While Sontag believes photographs testify to time's relentless melt, Sarshar looks for "an authentic portrait of a disintegrated community", while for Barthes "death" is the main matter and for Hirsch is about "the process of reading family photographs which disappeared".

We can find more and more in the importance of photography but after reading these four books, (Sontag, Sarshar, Barthes, and Hirsch) I realize they all have a common theme surrounding the issue of "disappearance". French sociologist, philosopher, and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard writes<sup>39</sup> about this issue and he says: "Behind every image, something has disappeared. And that is the source of its fascination." Baudrillard also talks more about the meaning of disappearance and the difference between Analog and digital photography in his book<sup>40</sup>. "What distinguishes the analog image is that it is the place where a form of disappearance, of distance, of 'freezing' of the world, plays itself out. That nothingness at the heart of the image which Andy Warhol<sup>41</sup> spoke of. Whereas, in the digital image, or, more generally, the CGI, there is no negative any longer, no 'time-lapse'. Nothing dies or disappears there. The image is merely the product of an instruction and a program, aggravated by automatic dissemination from one medium to the other: computer, mobile phone, TV screen, etc.- the automatic nature of the network-responding to the

---

<sup>35</sup> Houman Sarshar is an independent scholar and director of publications at the Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History (CIJOH) in LA, USA

<sup>36</sup> Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, 2005

<sup>37</sup> Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida. New York: Hill & Wang 1980, page 15

<sup>38</sup> Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory, 304 pages, author: Marianne Hirsch, published by: Harvard University. Press 1997

<sup>39</sup> Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared? Jean Baudrillard, page 32

<sup>40</sup> Ibid p49

<sup>41</sup> <http://tiny.cc/ee05kz>

automatic nature of the construction of the image.”

Now, I will start analyzing for detail and evidence in photos of the analog era taken either by Iranian Jews or professional photographers. My research may serve to help others in this field understand how photographs can play a key role in the life of immigrant families and their efforts in preserving a previous life in their birth country. In this section, I will use many quotes from Roland Barthes’ (*Camera Lucida*) as this book exactly covers photography and its role in family photos. I am looking to start off by analyzing some older photos taken in the 19th century and then proceeding to photo albums of families that left Iran in 1979 and later. Analyzing photos which were taken by Antoin Sevruguin from Jewish families highlights a wide contrast of social class in Iran during the time. Comparing photos (Fig. 1 & 2) gives us very interesting differences between the cultural backgrounds of religious minorities in a Muslim majority 19th century Iran.



Fig. 1 Hakim Nur-Mahmud (seated center with a book) and family, patients, servants, Sevruguin, Antoin, b&w; 23.5 cm. x 17.5 cm  
<https://asia.si.edu/research/iran-in-photographs/>

While an old medicine man and his family pose for Sevruguin, the only woman is seen in Fig. 1, covered her face by Chador (veil) and framed alone by the window. Comparing this photo with (Fig. 2) which Sevruguin took in the same period of time from a Jewish woman, shows how Jewish young women posed in front of the camera in western fashionable style. These photos

(Fig. 1&2) also show us women's role in the social matter issues in the past two centuries in Iran. While traditional and conservative ideas controlled the lives of most women, a beautiful Jewish woman charms with her pose looking straight to the camera, emphasizing her existence and demanding her role in a patriarchal society.





Fig. 2 A young Jewish woman in an elaborate costume, Sevruguin, Antoin, b&w <https://asia.si.edu/research/iran-in-photographs/>

Covering of one's face from strangers has a metaphorical meaning in both the Jewish and Muslim conservative societies of Iran in the 21st century. Jakob Eduard Polak<sup>42</sup>, (1818-1891) who served as the personal physician of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah<sup>43</sup> (1848-96) wrote about his 9 years of residency in Iran: "Jewish women who covered their faces with Chador were perceived to be Muslim women. So, they went freely to markets and were able to trade. They easily could survive months or even a year".<sup>44</sup>

In 2019, I visited an exhibition of "Veiled women of the holy land, new trends in modest dress" in the Jerusalem museum and captured two photos of mannequins representative of the dressings of Jews and Muslim women (Fig.3 & 4). The similarity between Judaism and Islam in religious rules, which are accepted by conservative followers in both religions, comes from Judaism as the oldest religion. However, with almost 150 years of difference between photographing photos of (Fig. 1&2) and photos (Fig. 3&4) it is evident that things have continued to remain the same in today's modern societies.

---

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/polak-jakob-eduard>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Naser-al-Din-Shah>

<sup>44</sup> Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, 2005, page 141



Fig. 3, Jewish modesty girls' holiday outfits (4-5 layers) Neturei Karta. Bratslav Hasidic women, Mea Shearim, Jerusalem, 2017, photo by Hassan Sarbakhshian



Fig. 4, Muslim women's outfit (munaqqaba) Jerusalem and environs, Baqa al-Gharbiyya, 2014-18 photo by Hassan Sarbakshian

Looking at a photograph (Fig. 5) that Sevrugin captured from a Jewish neighborhood in Tehran in the late 19th century, we can see how Jewish women used the same chador (veil) which is worn by the majority of Iran's conservative Muslim society nowadays.



Fig. 5, Jewish neighborhood in Tehran, Sevrugin, Antoin, b&w; 20.9 cm. x 15.6 cm <https://asia.si.edu/research/iran-in-photographs/>

Living in Islamic society for centuries taught the Jews of Iran a way to adapt to rules and cultural beliefs. Some of them have chosen Islamic names for their children to avoid future religious and economic problems.

“If Jewish women left their houses, they covered their feet with a long skirt and also veiled from head to toe with Chador. For covering their full-face they used Niqab (a face veil). To be distinguished from Muslim women who used a white-colored Niqab, Jewish women wore a black colored Niqab.”<sup>45</sup>

While Muslim clerics banned Shia Muslims from playing or listening to music, Jews became professional experts in Iranian classical music as well as wine production. They also played an

---

<sup>45</sup> Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrigh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, 2005, page 184



important role in producing movies in the 20th century.

Jews in Iran posed with photos of their loved ones who passed away in individual or family photos. In (Fig. 6) Arastoo Safaei is seen photographed with his uncle Haji Benjamin Asil Mezn Darani, as he holds a photo of his family member in 1911 in Damavand in Iran.



Fig. 6, from Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrigh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, An article by Janet Afary about Iranian Jews in Qajar era (from From displacement to settlement) Photo credit: Iraj Safaei

Hirsch mentioned about family frames and she says: “It is my argument in this book that all family photographs are composite, heterogeneous media, “image-text”: visual text, that is, whose readings are narrative and contextual but which also, in some ways, resist and circumvent narration”<sup>46</sup>. Sometimes it is only possible to understand a picture through the description and the narrative in which we try to articulate a specific image, which W.J.T. Mitchell<sup>47</sup> has called an

<sup>46</sup> Hirsch, Family frames: photography, narrative, and family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory: Harvard University Press, 1997

<sup>47</sup> <https://english.uchicago.edu/faculty/w-j-t-mitchell>



“image-text” (verbal picture)-the description of (usually) an imaginary visual object.

Barthes calls “flat death”-into fluidity, movement, and thus, finally, life. Does that mean writing represents life, love, and presence but photography represents death, loss, and absence?

If “a photograph must be read as writing and not seen as image” anybody can read his/her special family photo and not only see and observe it. In Fig.6 we see Mr. Darani, holding a photo of his family member and it seems as though he is emotional in this picture. Maybe he was thinking of the family member’s absence during the photoshoot. Mr. Darani’s dress and his mustache represent a western and well-educated person in a time in which the photo had been taken 109 years ago. The witness for his social class is compared with another long shot (Fig. 5) that Sevruguin captured from a Jewish neighborhood in Tehran. All men pictured (Fig. 5) are wearing the low-level social class dress and none of them have the same mustache as Darani’s. The idea of a superstitious form of ‘holding a photo of an absent family member’ exists in his mind even if he looks like he comes from a different social class. It is clear that for many decades, ordinary people were not able to afford paying for private studio photoshoots. Antoin Sevruguin, his brothers Kolia and Emanuel established their photography studio in Tehran, Iran. Antoin was born in the Russian embassy in Tehran as an Armenian-Georgian in a Russian family in 1851. His father Vasily was a diplomat in Tehran. Antoin could speak the Persian language fluently and he traveled around the country photographing people and social events too.

Barthes says<sup>48</sup> “My interest in photography took a more cultural turn. What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially”. He added “each time I would read something about photography I would think of some photographs I loved, and this made me furious. Myself, I saw only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body; but an important voice (the voice of knowledge, of Scientia) then adjourned me in a severe tone; Get back to photograph”.

Keeping in my mind what Barthes said about his ‘interest in photography’ I see some photos from Iranian Jewish families in Sarshar’s book (Esther’s Children). In 1936, Iran’s powerful king Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878-1944) forcefully ordered all Iranian women to unveil. Jewish women among others that had to follow King’s order. Reza Shah’s order was among other social and cultural developments in Iran in the early 20th century for modernizing the country and bringing women from inside of the house to outside of the house utilizing their abilities towards building the new society.

---

<sup>48</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill & Wang 1980



Fig.7, Nikbakht's family after unveiling order, in Hamadan, Iran, 8th Jan. 1936, Photo from Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, An article by Janet Afary about Iranian Jews in Qajar era (from From displacement to settlement) Photo credit: Faryar Nikbakht

For many years the Jewish community in Iran was among other minorities like Zoroastrians, Armenians, and Assyrians demanding their equal rights in many social issues compared with Muslim citizens in Iran. At the beginning of the 20th century with the society becoming more modern, Iran gave all minorities this opportunity to be part of the social, political and cultural movements without any discrimination. The great time for this opportunity was the early years of the century when Iran's constitutional revolution happened between 1905-1911. After the revolution which led to establishing the Parliament in Iran in the Qajar dynasty.

“Iran's new constitution allowed each of the major religious minorities to have a representative

of their choice in the new Majlis (Parliament). The first Jewish representative, Azizollah Simani, met with such hostility that he could not be effective and soon resigned. The Armenian representative followed suit, and they were both replaced by an influential Muslim clergyman. The Zoroastrians did not give in and maintained their representative. Not until the second Majlis in 1909 was Dr. Loqman Nehourai a French-educated doctor, elected as the Jewish representative; he remained in office until 13th session (1943).”<sup>49</sup>



Fig. 8, During Iran’s constitutional revolution some of the Jewish people joined the revolutionaries. In this photo, Aziz Asher Rabai Rahamim, is seen in a picture from 1920. The caption says: “when he was a teenager, he believed in equal rights for Iranians and joined revolutionaries in Rashat in 1909. Later he became a professional photographer.” Photo from Esther’s children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, An article by Shirin-dokht Daghighian about (The political life of Jewish intellectuals) Photo credit: HLCEF

I am trying to look for some social and cultural problems between Iran’s Jewish community in the last century through photographs that represent those issues. In the last educational year of the 19th century in Iran, the first Alliance (Israelite Universelle) school opened in Tehran to help improve the learning quality of Iranian Jewish children. However it was not easy to establish the modern education system in a traditional society.

“Challenges of Alliance: Introducing modern education and western culture. The economic and cultural problems were a historic barrier to the Alliance movement. Families did not allow girls

<sup>49</sup> The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Time. Columbia University Press, New York, 2002 page, 372

to attend school. Jewish girls stayed at home to take care of their siblings. Most of the Jewish girls were forced into marriage at the ages of 9 to 13 and were not allowed to leave the home alone.”<sup>50</sup>



Fig. 9, Portrait of Jewish Girl in Elaborate Costume, Sevruguin, Antoin, b&w; <https://asia.si.edu/research/iran-in-photographs/>

“By the academic year 1913-14, the number of male students in Tehran was 455 and the number of females, 190. A number of Muslim students, particularly from well-to-do homes, also attended.”<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, page 197

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/alliance-israelite-universelle>

Iran's history reminds us of the importance of the modern educational system. A half-century after the first Alliance school opened in Tehran, it started to affect the lives of Jewish women. As a result of the knowledge they learned in school, they participated in political, social and cultural events. After Reza Shah Pahlavi, was forced to abdicate by the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran on 16 Sept. 1941, communists who were lead by Toudeh party played an important role in the political situation (for a entire decade) until the prime minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddegh's government was overthrown in the 1953 Iranian coup d'etat orchestrated by the United States' Central Intelligence Agency. Many public demonstrations were organized by the left-groups from 1951 to 1953 protesting the situations in Iran. Jewish women participated in underground and public events that sometimes clashed with the police. Some Jewish and Muslim protestors were arrested during a demonstration on July 19th, 1952. They were harrassed and sentenced to long prison terms.<sup>52</sup>

The Iranian Jewish community had less information about what was happening against the Jews in German-occupied areas during WWII until Polish Jewish immigration to Iran. Maybe these experiences helped them to adapt to the situation they faced them after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. "When Polish children who were known as *Tehran Children*<sup>53</sup> fled to Iran, the Iranian Jewish community helped them. For the first time, Iranian Jewish people were **informed** about the massacre of European Jewish who survived. Therefore, they had a chance to keep their relationship with the land of Israel more and more. Iranian Jewish families accepted Polish Jewish children as stepchildren. They grew up in Iran, married and became members of Iran's society.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, page 264

<sup>53</sup> "Tehran Children: A Holocaust Refugee Odyssey" Mikhal Dekel, published by W. W. Norton & Company; 1 edition (October 1, 2019)

<sup>54</sup> Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, page 238





Fig. 10, Polish soldiers who escaped from the Nazi German army, stayed with the Mehdizadeh family in Iran in 1941. Photo from Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrteh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, An article by Avi David about (Zionism) Photo credit: Shokrollah Mehdizadeh

Antoin Sevruquin's photos taught me about how Jews dress. The jewelry of the teenage girl in (Fig.9) is strange since she is a village girl (maybe she is a bridal who is scared and desperate). In (Fig.5) all men had hats and women were covered with Chador. In (Fig.2) the woman is wearing a scarf her naked legs show, and in (Fig.1) we see an old medicine man with a Mulla's dress (clergyman) which is an official Muslim Shia Mulla's dress nowadays. These are social and cultural changes we witnessed in Jewish society in late 19th and early 20th centuries in Iran. I think because of Sevruquin's parental background and his access to the Russian embassy in Tehran, he had knowledge about western-style photography poses. He succeeds to represent part of the transition of traditional society to the modern style. We have seen a rich vision of classic

portraits as well as the other buildings, shrines, religious figures and landscape in his photography as well.<sup>55</sup> However when people posed in front of Sevruguin's camera, they noticed that they now will exist forever (at least as an image). Barthes says<sup>56</sup>: "I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image."



Fig. 11, Chief Rabbi of Golpayegan Samuel Cohen (center) with his sons and one of his grandchild, pose in his house in Golpayegan in 1941 in Iran. In the caption of the photo mentioned: All the books seen here are Hebrew and brought from Iraq by camels. The position of the hands of men in this photo represents the religious meaning of Cohanim<sup>57</sup>. Jewish priesthood (**Cohanim**) are an unusual group in that the men of this ancient priestly class can claim descent from a single male ancestor. Ever since the priestly status has been handed down from father to son through the ages. Photo from Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrchieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, (Article of Arlene Dallafar, 'Iranian Jewish diaspora Women: Experiencing Mizrahi Identity in exile.' In Studying Jewish Women: An Interchange of Ideas from 11 countries, Waltham, 1999) Photo credit: Shirzad Abrams

<sup>55</sup> <https://asia.si.edu/research/iran-in-photographs/antoin-sevruguin/>

<sup>56</sup> Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida. New York: Hill & Wang 1980

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/israel/familycohanim.html>



There is another example of the photo which represents the religious effect in Jewish life (Fig. 12) from the whipping<sup>58</sup> of a student in Shiraz in Iran by Rabbi Isaac Bael Heinz. Lawrence D Loeb and his wife Naomi traveled to Iran in 1967 and spent months with the Jewish community in Tehran, Shiraz and 12 other cities around Iran. They filmed and photographed many traditions, buildings, and synagogues in their trip to Iran.



Fig. 12, Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, Photo credit: Lawrence D. Loeb, 1967 in Shiraz, Iran,

Photographers who traveled to Iran in the 50s and 60s were able to capture parts of the social life of Iranian Jews. Stanley Abramovitch who worked as JDC Director for Iran from 1945-1952<sup>59</sup>. Abramovitch documented his mission by taking photographs of Iranian Jewish people who wanted to immigrate to the newly established state of Israel. Until 1950, Iranian Jewish people tried hard to distance themselves from poverty and illiteracy and they succeeded.

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/flogging>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.jdc.org/> a leading Jewish humanitarian organization combating poverty and crisis in over 90 countries in the past 106 years



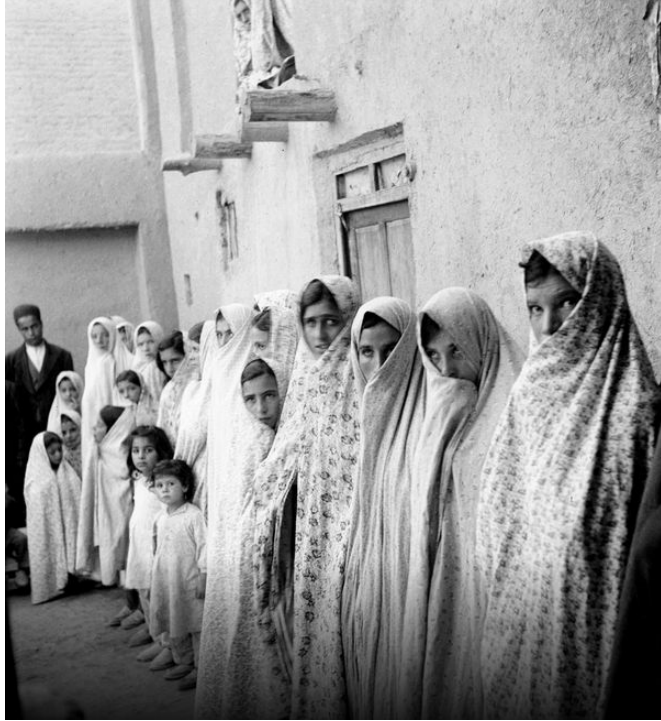


Fig. 13, Schoolgirls in Kashan 1952, Photo by Stanley Abramovitch <https://archives.jdc.org/project/stanley-abramovitch-iran-1949-1952/>



Fig. 14, Distribution of AJDC clothing in Yazd, 1952 in Iran, Photo by Stanley Abramovitch  
<https://archives.jdc.org/project/stanley-abramovitch-iran-1949-1952/>

## Chapters devoted to my own research and analysis



Fig. 15, Moshe Aloni poses in front of Mashadiha synagogue in Tel Aviv, in May 2019. Moshe emigrated to Israel in 1949.

Photo by Hassan Sarbakhshian, Israel 2019

In May 2019 I met Moshe Aloni in Tel Aviv, he emigrated to Israel in 1949. He says it was difficult because he lived in a tent with his father. His father was very disheartened from the situation and he was crying every night to return to Iran but the authorities kept his passport so, he could not return to Iran. He says that after 70 years, Iran is his homeland and that one day he will certainly return to Iran because he still has family in Shiraz. Moshe says living in Israel was always combined with fears of war because he lost his 20-year-old son to the war in Israel.

We also witnessed some traditions related to religious matters like sacrificing sheep in the wedding ceremony of Homa Sarshar and Nejat Sarshar who are parents of Hooman Sarshar who compiled the book “Esther’s Children”. In (Fig. 16) Homa (bride) holds the hand of her husband

Nejat Sarshar, while other men sacrifice a sheep during their wedding party in Tehran in 1966. This tradition is rooted in genesis 22:9-12 where we read: “Abraham tied Isaac and put him on the altar. He held the knife over Isaac. Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son, but an angel spoke to Abraham. He told Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham had obeyed God. God loved Abraham.”<sup>60</sup> The other event which I photographed (Fig.17) in 2008 shows Jews sacrificing a cow in kosher rules at Mashadiha synagogue in Tehran for distribution between Jewish families.



Fig. 16, Homa (bride) holds the hand of her husband Nejat Sarshar, while other men sacrifice a sheep during their wedding party in Tehran in 1966. Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrchieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue,

Photo credit: Homa Sarshar

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/ot/gen/22.9-12?lang=eng#p8>



Fig. 17, Iranian Jews sacrifice a cow in "Jew kosher rules" at Mashadiha synagogue in Tehran. Photo credit: Hassan Sarbakhshian, 2008

In 538 BCE King Cyrus of Persia permitted the exiled from Judah to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple. The former Kingdom of Judah became a small province, called Yehud, within the Persian Empire, and its inhabitants were for the first time referred to as Jews (Yehudim; Nehemiah 1:2).

Jewish people believed King Cyrus is the Messiah. King Cyrus's name was mentioned 23 times in the Torah with respect and glory. In a picture from 1971 Homa and Nejat Sarshar, pose (Fig.18) with soldiers who wore clothes from the Achaemenids era during the 2,500th year of the Foundation of the Imperial State of Iran.



۴۵۲. نجات و هما سرشار در جشن های ۲۵۰۰ ساله، شیراز، ۱۵ اکتبر ۱۹۷۱ م. نجات سرشار رییس کمیسیون گسترش الکتریکی شهری و شرکت واتر-پاور و مدیر عملیات مهندسی و مسئول برق رسانی به تخت جمشید برای برگزاری جشن های ۲۵۰۰ ساله بود. هما سرشار روزنامه نگار مجله زن روز و بعدها سردبیر، از به ترین روزنامه نگارها و برنامه سازان دوره ی خود شمرده می شد.



Fig. 18, Homa (2nd left) and her husband Nejat Sarshar, attend during the 2,500th year of Foundation of Imperial State of Iran, in Shiraz on Oct. 15th, 1971. Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue,

Photo credit: Homa Sarshar

It was a restriction for them being a Jew and a member of Iran's army. In the description of the photograph (Fig.19), we see this problem and how a Jewish man resolved it by hiding his identity as a Jewish man and after changing his family name he joined Iran's army.



Fig. 19, In a photo (bottom) Nuri Kamrouz is seen with other members of the Cavalry Regiment in Meshkin-Shahr, 1949. The caption says: “In that time Jewish men were not allowed to join the army. But Nuri, changed his family name and hid his Jewish identity and he could be a member of the Cavalry Regiment”. Esther’s children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, Photo credit: Monty Kamrouz

Iranian Jewish people could get a chance to be part of members of Iran’s army, political parties and governmental employees during Pahlavi I and II. They connected with officials and attended parties hosted by the Royal family. One of the richest and influential members of the Jewish community before the revolution in 1979 was Habib Elghanian. He was a successful businessman and head of the Iranian Jewish community in the 1970s.



Fig. 20. Habib Elghanian left shakes hands with Iran's empress Farah Pahlavi in this undated photo. Photographer unknown.

Unfortunately, the result of the revolution of 1979 was not optimistic for all Iranians expected to see a real democracy. Many groups and political parties including minorities had participated in demonstrations against Pahlavi II. The Iranian Jewish community also supported (Fig. 21) the national movement. However Ayatollah Khomeini<sup>61</sup> as the father and founder of the revolution showed his real face after the victory on 11th Feb. 1979 when the Pahlavi dynasty officially ended. Only five days later Khomeini ordered for stabilizing the revolution court which ended executing hundreds of former regime's officials. Sadly Habib Elghanian was arrested and sentenced to death. He was the first Jewish businessman to be executed by the order of the Islamic Revolutionary Court on May, 9th 1979.

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ruhollah-Khomeini>



Fig. 21, In the small photo, chief Rabbi of Iran Yedidia Shofet, (left) and his son David attend during a demonstration in Tehran, (big photo) show Iranian Jewish people attend in during a demonstration in Tehran, 1979. Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, The banner carried by Iranian Jewish people attending during a demonstration in Tehran, 1979 says: "Our connection with the Iranian national movement is unbreakable". Photo credit: Simon Rahimian,

In this part of my thesis, I want to go back briefly to the "ordinary photography" and the function of memory. When we see personal and family photos we remember cultural and historical events too. In fact, we see the past through the eyes of ordinary people. It does not matter if they took the photos or not, even when they were part of the "frizzed moment" of the past in their photos we could see the past as they were witnessed. They observed events and they lived moments with their experiences of pain and joy. Decoding those forgotten times it's possible via looking at those photographs a few decades later. After Muslim conservative revolutionaries controlled all they needed to keep ultimate power. Nobody could imagine that if freely dressed women attended in a demonstration against Shah in (fig. 21) they must veil Hijab (fig. 22). Now, after four decades, the basic demand of the women activists in Iran is to get a chance to choose freely what dress they exactly want to wear like before 1979.





Fig. 22, Celebration of “bat mitzvah” of Jewish girls in Tehran, 1990. In this picture, girls covered their heads with scarfs and wore a full covered dress (after 1980 there was a mandatory law for all females that they must follow the law which forbade women to come outside of their private residency without Hijab. In Islamic law, girls must start covering their bodies and hairs too. In the background is seen Iran’s national flag, the late founder of revolution Ayatollah Khomeini’s picture (3rd right), picture of Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, (2nd and 4th from right) and a picture of former President of Iran, Hashemi Rafsanjani, (1st right). This photo is used in an article of “David Manasheer, titled: Post-Revolutionary Politica in Iran: Religion, society, and Power. London, 2001.” Esther’s children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, Photo credit: Rahmat Rahimian.

Important questions by Marianne Hirsch<sup>62</sup> asked about family photos: “what are the stories they left out? What are the stories they are not told? Whose history matters? Whose history does not matter? How does the family start telling their history? By family photographs which are a very important medium and very important genre which family histories are told. Not just single photographs but albums.”

The difference in time between the two captured photographs (Fig. 23 & 24) is 82 years. Fig. 23, was taken in 1919 in Hamadan the other one (Fig. 24) was taken in July 2001 in Los Angeles. Yet there is one person who sits in both photographs, the girl with a white scarf in the bottom center is the same old woman first in the right Tuba Kimiabakhsh Somkh. Why is it, that the girl in the 1919 photo is not smiling like the woman in the 2001 photo? The photo which was taken in 2001 shows five generations of mothers and daughters. We see a modern immigrant family pose happily in front of the camera. Did any of them ask themselves why no one smiled in a

<sup>62</sup> <https://youtu.be/hseKCnMI9PE>

family photo which was taken almost a century ago? As a part of the Eastern culture of the time, girls in traditional, conservative and religious families were taught to be elegant and reserved. That's why I think Tuba did not smile in the first photo. The other contrast between these two photos, in the backgrounds of both. The old one was taken in a photography studio in Iran but the new one was taken in their private homes in the United States. Did Tuba tell any stories about the old photo to her daughter and granddaughters?



Fig. 23, Mir-aqa, and his family in Hamedan in 1919. Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, Photo credit: Tuba Somkh





Fig. 24, Five generations of mother and daughters in July 2001 in Los Angeles. Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrteh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, Photo credit: Mahin Somkh Kamran

Marianne Hirsch mentioned<sup>63</sup>: “Unlike other representational forms, Barthes insists, photography holds a unique relation to the real, defined not through the discourse of artistic representation, but that of magic, alchemy, indexicality, fetishism: I call ‘photographic referent’ not the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessary* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph ... The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star.”

The reality of past memories and losing loved ones discovered through photographs after many many years in a different geographical and emotional situation is not an easy task. “*Truth hurts*”, This is short but meaningful. Barthes says<sup>64</sup>: “The photograph does not necessarily say *what is no*

<sup>63</sup> Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory, author: Marianne Hirsch, published by Harvard University. Press 1997, page 4

<sup>64</sup> Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida. New York: Hill & Wang 1980, page 85

longer, but only and for certain *what has been*. This distinction is decisive. “



Fig. 25 & 26, Hanna Jahanforooz, (top left in Iran 1981. Her Iranian ID photo is seen as she veiled scarf, top right Hanna poses for me in Israel 2019) Photo credits: left, Hanna Jahanforooz/ right, Hassan Sarbakshian



Fig. 27, Janet Rothstein - Yahudaya, (2nd left from bottom row) has been living in Israel for 50 years. She believes that Iran is her motherland and there is no doubt about it, however, she has escaped everything due to Iran's severe conditions and taboo during the 1960s. Janet now knows Israel as her home and she loves her homeland. She owes herself to the two lands of Iran and Israel. She sees Iranian music as a source of inspiration for her music. Photo credit; Janet Rothstein - Yahudaya



Fig. 28, Janet Rothstein - Yahudaya, Israel 2019, Photo credit: Hassan Sarbakhshian

Marianne Hirsch talks about important issues which each could be remembered while we are looking at the family photos:

- *Mourning and post-memory*
- *Reframing the human family romance*
- *Masking the subject*
- *Unconscious optics*
- *Maternal exposures*
- *Resisting Images*
- *Pictures of a displaced girlhood and*
- *Past Lives*

Family photography is very repetitive and very conventional ... However, why are they sometimes so powerful? These are among other issues and questions which Hirsch mentioned in

her book<sup>65</sup>:

- *Albums of lost....people who have been killed*
- *The relationship of family photography to the lost*
- *How did people not want to see some photos again?*
- *Family stories, narratives of lost and images of lost*

Sometimes it is only possible to understand a picture through the description and narrative in which we try to articulate a specific image. W.J.T. Mitchell has called this an “image-text”. Personal and family photographs figure importantly in cultural memory, and memory work with photographs offers a particularly productive route to understanding the social and cultural aspects of memory. Annette Kuhn<sup>66</sup> described in an article titled: “Photography and cultural memory: a methodological exploration”.



Fig. 29, Unknown Jewish boys swim in a yard in summer in Iran in the 1960s. Photo credits: left, Ya'akov (Mirza) Mishmarti

---

<sup>65</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* photography narrative and post-memory  
[https://books.google.cz/books/about/Family\\_Frames.html?id=IRt3E0nfuo4C&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.cz/books/about/Family_Frames.html?id=IRt3E0nfuo4C&redir_esc=y)

<sup>66</sup> <https://people.southwestern.edu/~bednarb/comm-memory/articles/kuhn.pdf>





Fig. 30, Ya'akov (Mirza) Mishmarti (first left) is from Shiraz and emigrated to Israel 60 years ago. He considers Israel a home country and never wants to return to Iran. He says he was born in Iran, he served in the military and worked as a laborer, but now Israel is his homeland. Haila Barel is Ya'akov's granddaughter. Photo credits: Ya'akov (Mirza) Mishmarti

The deeper I dive into analyzing family photo albums of the Iranian Jewish diaspora, one bold question is being pondered in my head about the fate of family members who posed in front of cameras. What happened to them, are they dead or alive? It seems Barthes<sup>67</sup> has already answered this question too: “With the Photograph, we enter into *Flat Death*”. He describes: “All those young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death. This is the way in which our times assume Death: with the denying alibi of the distractedly “alive,” of which the Photographer is in a sense the professional”. For Photography must have some historical relation with what Edgar Morin<sup>68</sup> calls the “crisis of death” beginning in the second half of the 19th century; for my part, I should prefer that instead of constantly relocating the advent of Photography in its social and economic context, we should also inquire about the anthropological place of Death and of the new image. For Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in the image which produces Death while trying to preserve life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to intrusion in our modern society of a symbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, and a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. *Life / Death*: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print.”

<sup>67</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill & Wang 1980, page 92

<sup>68</sup> Edgar Morin is a French philosopher and sociologist who was born 1921

If we accept the idea that Barthes mentioned above, how should we read photographs? Barthes<sup>69</sup> says: “The reading of public photographs is always, at the bottom, a private reading. This is obvious for old (“historical”) photographs, in which I read a period contemporary with my youth, or with my mother, or beyond, with my grandparents, and into which I project a troubling being, that of the lineage of which I am the final term. However, this is also true of the photographs which at first glance have no link, even a metonymic one, with my existence (for instance, all journalistic photographs).”



Fig. 31, Jewish schoolboys pose in Ettehad school in Golpaygan in the 1920s. In some of the photos, we could see using the carpet as background decoration. (see also Fig. 48) Photo credit: Farhad Moradian

---

<sup>69</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill & Wang 1980, page 97



## **Conclusion**

### **Conclusion: Between fear and freedom, the life of Iranian Jews,**

Living in exile for a decade taught me how hard it was for Iranians who left their country after the 1979 revolution. Many of them passed away in other countries and never had the chance to visit Iran again. In Iran Muslims never hear anything about Judaism, their ceremonies, their holidays and their traditions such as the Passover or Rosh Hashanah. Muslims ordinarily do not hear anything about Jews and Judaism, nor are they familiar with Jewish customs, ceremonies, and traditions. All of these hard situations in centuries didn't cause loss of identity for Iranian Jews since they identify themselves as Iranian Jewish not only Jewish.

Jews no longer live in my city, Tabriz. In fact, it was hate and discrimination against Jewish people in Tabriz, Lar and Mashhad that forced these people to convert to Islam during the ruling of Fath'ali Shah(1797-1834) and Mohammad Shah (1834-1848).<sup>70</sup> Everything in Jewish life happens behind the walls and closed doors. Iranian Jews live between fear and freedom in Iran.

During the Pahlavi II era, Israel and Iran had an intimate relationship with full diplomatic representation and cooperation in myriad fields. Following the revolution, the once lively Israeli Embassy in Kakh Street in Tehran was closed and its building has served as the Palestinian Embassy since then.

---

<sup>70</sup> Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, first issue, 2005, page 141



Fig. 32, Revolutionaries occupied Israel embassy in Tehran, as Yasser Arafat (in the center) or by his kunya, Abu Ammar, was Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization and Ahmad Khomeini, (2nd right) son of the founder of Iran's revolution attend in changing of the building which has served as the Palestinian Embassy in Feb. 17th, 1979. Photo credit: IRNA for more photos: <http://tiny.cc/8eiimz>

In 1999, I covered my first assignment when 13 Jews in Shiraz were accused of spying for Israel. Since then I 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 grown to become bitter enemies.

Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad denied the Holocaust during a conference in 2005 in Tehran when he said<sup>71</sup>: "Holocaust is a fictitious current idea" and he mentioned, "the world without Israel will be safe." At this time I realized I wanted to work on documenting the life of the Iranian Jewish community but it was not easy for an Iranian Muslim-born journalist to cover the closed lives of Jewish people in Iran. The victory of the 1979 revolution made many of them leave and made Iranians more curious and interested to hear stories about Jews in Iran. Reza Sayah reported for PBS<sup>72</sup> about the life of Iranian Jewish and asked from Siamak Morsadegh (Fig. 32) who is the only Jew member of the Iranian Parliament. He said: "Twenty years ago, Morsadegh's wife wanted the couple to move to America. She left. He stayed, choosing Iran's more conservative culture. The reporter of PBS asked Morsadegh if he gave up his wife to stay

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2005/12/200849154418141136.html>

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/despite-tension-between-iran-and-israel-irans-jewish-minority-feels-at-home>

in Iran? Morsadegh's response was: "Yes, it's very important for me. I think that I cannot live without Iranian culture. I can't tolerate my wife to dress in bikini at the seaside, because I grew up in Iranian culture." There are some cultural issues that all Iranian following those moral rules and does not matter if you are Muslim, Jewish or Christian. As far as you grow up in a society in which there are restrictions and unwritten laws that everybody follows and in this case, Morsadegh's response is categorizing the same issues.



Fig. 33, Jew member of the Iranian Parliament Siamak Morsedegh, left, kisses Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during a Parliament session on Dec 30, 2008, in Tehran. Photo credit: Hassan Sarbakhshian

Every year, on the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan, Iran celebrates "Ruz-e Quds" (Jerusalem Days). The leaders of the 1979 Revolution Ayatollah Khomeini, declared these days as a display of 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 and solidarity with the Palestinian people. Later, when I attended the Jewish events in Tehran, I witnessed them praying to travel to Israel.



Fig. 34, Former leader of Iran's Jewish community Haroun Yashayaei, center, and Judaism researcher and Arash Abaei, (1st left in the middle row) attend during Tehran Friday Prayer ceremony marking the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan, Iran celebrates "Ruz-e Quds" (Jerusalem Days) on Nov. 12, 2004, in Tehran. Photo credit: Hassan Sarbakhshian

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 Muslim's Imam Ali has been carved. There is a women's section in the shrine which belongs to the Jewish on the days that they are allowed to visit. For a couple of hours for pilgrimage and men section of the shrine is for Muslim men. On that trip I saw Jews reading *Psalms* and Muslims reading Muslims *Mafatih al-Jinan*. I Also saw a Muslim woman wearing a Hijab followed Jews on their trip to Susa to go on a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Prophet Daniel. She believed that these Jewish shrines satisfied her needs. On another trip to Hamadan, Jews stopped for their morning prayer in a Muslim establishment. I saw them praying under the picture of Imam Ali, the first Shia Imam, toward Jerusalem where a couple of hours later Muslims would pray towards Mecca. When I photographed the Jewish cemetery Beheshtieh in Khavaran area in the southeast of Tehran I photographed a gravestone carved with a verse from the Quran, Muslims' holy book, which read "When a person dies we belong to Allah and to Him we return." This similarity suggests that the culture of Iranian Jews in Iran's Muslim culture fuse combines the cultural elements that sometimes make it impossible to distinguish between Jews and Muslims in Iran.

In Mashhadiha Synagogue in Tehran, I photographed (Fig. 17) a Kosher cow slaughtering and I found out the ritual was very similar to the Muslim ritual slaughtering of sheep or cows. The

main differences is that for the meat to be Kosher they slaughter toward Jerusalem and a Rabbi is in attendance. Also, the butcher must move the knife immediately across the neck to kill the animal to avoid any suffering or feeling of pain. I photographed a young Iranian Jew who did not follow all religious rules and sometimes he had eaten in Muslim restaurants secretly. A young Jew in Shiraz told me he could not stop eating '*Che lo Kabab*' and '*Dizy*' two main Iranian famous foods.

In another trip to Shiraz, the city whose 13 of its Jewish community members were accused of spying for Israel in 1999, I visited a Jewish school that as the population decreased following Iran's 1979 revolution, Muslim students had been using during weekdays. Jewish students studying Hebrew and religion studied during weekends only. I photographed Jewish students playing and studying under a picture of Lebanese Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, in the same day I accompanied Shahrokh Paknahad, one of the 13 Jewish men who were accused of spying for Israel (he was released after several years of being in prison), we visited a Jewish cemetery in Shiraz and I took a picture of Iran's national flags over the grave of a Jewish soldier who died in the war between Iran and Iraq (1980-88).

Photographing the Sapir hospital in Tehran, the second largest charity hospital in the world, was a great experience for me. This place was the only place in which religion is not the top priority. I photographed Muslim babies born by the hands of a Jewish doctor. I looked at the Jewish doctor who was the person which Muslim mothers trusted him to deliver their babies.



Fig. 35, A Jewish doctor holds a newborn Muslim baby at Dr. Sapir hospital in Tehran in Spet. 2007. Photo credit: Hassan Sarbakhshian

To this day I am still documenting and hopefully will once more travel to Israel in the near future to complete the remaining parts of my project. However I am also thinking of what Barthes quotes from Franz Kafka<sup>73</sup> in his book<sup>74</sup>. "Ultimately-or at the limit-in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes. The necessary condition for an image is sight," (Czech writer Gustav) Janouch told Kafka; and Kafka<sup>75</sup> smiled and replied: "We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes."

Do we really photograph things to drive them out of our minds? Or in this case, what Sontag describes as the family's photograph album are often what remains of our family? I like to finish my research with Susan Sontag's words when she describes a family's photo album "Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself-a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed so long as photographs get taken and are cherished. Photography becomes a rite of family life just when, in the industrializing countries of Europe and America, the very institution of the family starts undergoing radical surgery. As that claustrophobic unit, the nuclear family was being carved out of a much larger family aggregate, photography came along to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life. Those ghostly traces, photographs supply the token presence of the dispersed relations. A family's photograph album is generally about the extended family and, often, is all that remains of it."<sup>76</sup>



Fig. 36, Iranian Jewish family pose a snapshot at Jewish prophet Habaquq's shrine in Hamedan in March 2008.

<sup>73</sup> Franz Kafka was a German-speaking Bohemian novelist and short-story writer, 1883-1924

<sup>74</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill & Wang 1980, page 53

<sup>75</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill & Wang 1980, page 53

<sup>76</sup> *On Photography*, Author Susan Sontag, publisher: Picador, page 9



Photo credit: Hassan Sarbakhshian



Fig. 37, The Moradian family posed in Arak in Iran in the 1960s, Farhad, 2nd left, had immigrated to Israel 41 years ago and spent two-thirds of his life in Israel. He follows and reads Persian (Farsi) every day and the feeling of being different from the Israeli community is always with him. Although he knows that the home of the fatherland is Israel, he still wants to return to Iran. He says even the colors of the soil between Iran and Israel are different. Farhad says: living in Israel means as though someone has picked you up from somewhere and planted you somewhere else. Rowshan Gabaei Moradian, the woman who holds a baby, (Farhad's mother) was born in Golpayegan, one of the central cities of Iran. For her, Iran is a patriotic motherland and Israel is a patriotic country and it's not possible to not love both. She says she has a lot of memories of Iran and misses her neighbors and friends. She wants to travel to Iran in the event of peace and reconciliation between the two countries.

Photo credit: Farhad Moradian



Fig. 38, Farhad Moradian, and his mother Rowshan Gabaei Moradian pose in Rowshan's apartment in Tel Aviv in Israel in 2019.

Photo credit: Hassan Sarbakhshian



Fig. 39, Jewish schoolgirls are seen with scarfs in their classroom in Shiraz, Photo credit: Hassan Sarbakshian



Fig. 40, Sahar Bradaran, 18 years old and her parents immigrated to Israel many years before from Iran. She knows and speaks a little Farsi and mentions that the root of all that she has come from is in Iran. Since her parents have familiarized and entrusted her to Iranian culture, Iran is everything to her. She knows Israel as her birthplace, but her culture continues to make her who she is today.

Photo credit: Hassan Sarbakshian, Israel, 2019



Fig. 41, Jacob Gabaei's family, Jacob is in the center with his sons Siynor, Ayub, Habib and his daughter Ziba pose in the 1920s. Jacob is the grandfather of Rowshan Gabaei Moradian(Fig. 38). Photo credit: Farhad Moradian



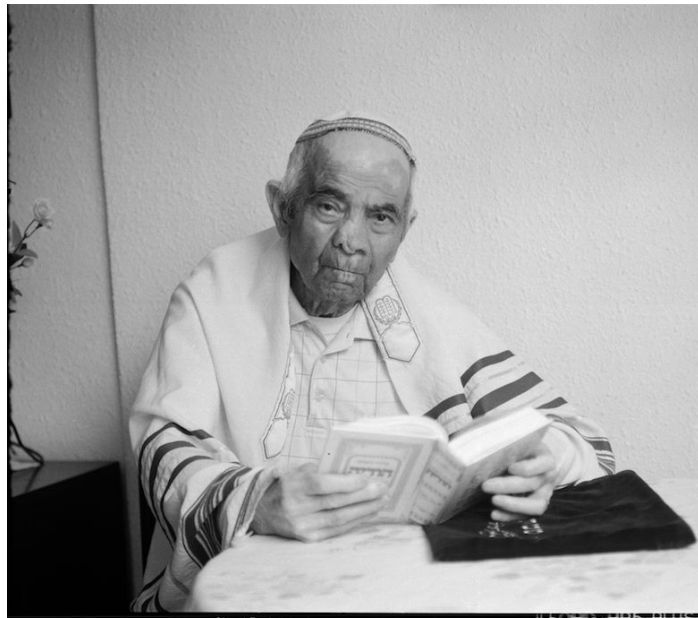


Fig. 42 & 43, Ya'akov (Mirza) Mishmarti (left, posed with his wife in Iran) and (right, posed in his home in Israel). He is from Shiraz and emigrated to Israel 60 years ago. He considers Israel a home country and never wants to return to Iran. He says he was born in Iran, he served in the military and worked as a laborer, but now Israel is his homeland. Haila Barel is Ya'akov's granddaughter.

Photo credits: left, Ya'akov (Mirza) Mishmarti / Right: Hassan Sarbakhshian



Fig. 44, Haila Barel is the granddaughter of Ya'akov (Mirza) Mishmart, she is the second-third generation of Iranian immigrants who were born in Israel but love Iran. Most of her family is from Iran and she has heard about Iran many times since her childhood. She says her personality and personal life are centered around Iran. She says she faces a lot of racial discrimination in Israel because she is from an Islamic and Oriental country even in Israel, she faces discrimination. Photo credit: Hassan Sarbakhshian, Israel, 2019



Fig. 45 & 46, Yusef Gidianian, top left, Yusef posed with his friend in Persepolis in Iran in 1972, Top right Yusef poses for me in Israel 2019. He said after 48 years living in Israel when he wants to speak everyone recognizes his accent is not an Israeli and he feels he does not have any homeland. Photo credits: left, Yusef Gidianian/ Right: Hassan Sarbakhshian



Fig. 47, Jewish men in Arak in the early 1940s. Photo credit: Farhad Moradian

## Notes

**-Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, publisher: Picador, 208 pages**

**-Vilem Flusser, *Towards a philosophy of photography***

**-Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared? Jean Baudrillard**

**-Marianne Hirsch, "Family Frames photography narrative and post-memory-"**

*Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, 304 pages, author: Marianne Hirsch, published by Harvard University. Press 1997

**-Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography**

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill & Wang 1980

**-Esther's Children**

Esther's children, compiled by Hooman Sarshar, translated by Mehrnaz Nasrieh, Karang publications, Tehran, the first issue

**-Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran** <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=27883>

**-Iran's Jews: It's Our Home And We Plan To Stay**

<https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/02/19/387265766/irans-jews-its-our-home-and-we-plan-to-stay?t=1572377570822>

**-<http://www.asia.si.edu/research/archives/sevruguin.asp>**