



# ALLIANCE ISRAÉLITE UNIVERSELLE

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**ALLIANCE ISRAÉLITE UNIVERSELLE**, the first worldwide Jewish organization, through which a number of Jewish schools were founded in Iran. Established in Paris in 1860, the Alliance aimed at the unification of Jews, the defense of their political and social rights, and the combating of anti-Semitism. Within a short time, it threw its organizational skills into the path of teaching and education; by the beginning of the 20th century it had opened branches in the countries of Eastern Europe, the Balkans, North Africa, and the Middle East. In 1865 the first Alliance school was opened in Baghdad; through it the Jews of Hamadān and Tehran made contact with Alliance headquarters in Paris. But the Alliance's efforts to establish schools in Iran in the following years remained ineffective.

On 12 July 1873 a meeting took place in Paris between Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah and the members of the central committee of the Alliance under the leadership of Adolphe Cremieux; attending were Mirzā Ḥosayn Khan, Iran's prime minister, and Malkom Khan, Iranian plenipotentiary in London. Signatures were exchanged on an agreement reflecting the contents of the meeting. In a letter to Mirzā Ḥosayn Khan dated 14 June, Cremieux enumerated five important points: 1. All the people of Iran should be informed of the shah's patronage for the establishment of the Alliance school in Iran. 2. The appointment of teachers would be responsibility of the central committee. 3. The location of the school and the hiring of Persian teachers would be the responsibility of the



government of Iran. 4. With the agreement of His Majesty and at the expense of the Alliance some Jewish youths would be sent to Paris for their education. 5. The expenses of the Alliance school in Tehran would be the responsibility of the central committee; if, with the consent of Iran, other schools were founded in the provinces, their expenses would also be the responsibility of the committee. In his reply dated 18 July, the prime minister agreed with the contents of Cremieux's letter and emphasized that the Iranian government would act as quickly as possible to aid the establishment and maintenance of Alliance schools (see *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, first semester, 1873).

Following this meeting, the Alliance sought the financial, political, and economic support of the Jewish communities of Iran before the establishment of its school. After the publication of the agreement between the shah and the Alliance, the Jews of Tehran opened a temporary school and immediately requested aid and teachers (*ibid.*, 1875, pp. 60-61); the successive requests regarding the establishment of Alliance schools in other towns remained ineffective on account of a limited budget and a lack of teachers (*Anglo-Jewish Association Report*, 1875-76, p. 92; 1881-82, p. 35; *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, 1896, pp. 68-69). During the reign of Moẓaffar-al-dīn Shah, the Alliance and the Anglo-Jewish Association informed the king of the past agreement and obtained his consent to establish schools. In April, 1898, twenty-five years after the agreement with Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah, the first Alliance school opened in Tehran. The shah emphasized his approval by awarding it two hundred tomans through the minister of foreign affairs. In the academic year 1898-99 the number of students enrolled in the elementary classes was 350 (421 by the end of the year), out of a Jewish community of 6,000 in Tehran; the following year an Alliance school for girls opened and evening classes were established for adults. Yearly tuition at the school was 1,200 francs (approximately 240 tomans at that time). Two-thirds of the student body was exempted from monthly payments and approximately sixty poor and orphan students were given free meals. 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.

Prior to the establishment of Alliance schools the education of Iranian Jews was conducted in traditional methods. Students sat in a semicircle on the floor of the synagogue before a "mulla." The curriculum consisted of learning the Hebrew letters and then attaching the vowels; afterwards the students would



read and memorize verses from the Torah, prayer books, and sermons. Students of various ages and different educational backgrounds would study at the same time; the older, more advanced students were entrusted with the education of the younger ones. Several semi-circles would form in the corners of the synagogue while the students repeated aloud whatever they heard from the mulla or their respective teachers. The teaching of the translation of the Torah into Persian, which Iranian Jews referred to as the *Tafsīr*, took place by looking at the Hebrew word and reciting the Persian equivalent. The mulla's salary depended on the material condition of the families of the students. In theory the teaching of each subject had its own price. For example, teaching a thirteen-year-old boy to read from the Torah before the congregation required a high wage. It seems that these educational conditions were more prevalent in Iran during the 18th and 19th centuries; the intellectual and literary traces that survive in the form of manuscripts testify that the Iranian Jewish educational system was more advanced and better organized in former centuries. With the founding of the Alliance schools in Iran the old method of education was gradually replaced by a European method unique in Iran. The educational activities of the Alliance can be divided into three different periods:

*From 1898 to 1920.* Schools were founded in Tehran (1898), Hamadān (1900), Isfahan (1901), Shiraz (1903), Sanandaĵ (1903), and Kermānšāh (1904), while the following communities were given help in establishing schools: Tūyserkān and Nehāvand (1906), Kāšān (1911), and Golpāyagān (1914). World War I curtailed Alliance activities because of the severance of ties with the Paris headquarters. During this period the Alliance schools paid little attention to the teaching of Jewish subjects; their goal was the preparation of students for a useful life in a non-Jewish society. Thus traditional Jewish societies were opposed to the Alliance curriculum, not only in Iran but also in other Eastern countries. From the beginning the language of instruction was French and the textbooks were based on French models, so Jewish youths gained little knowledge of the Persian or Hebrew languages and cultures. Some Iranian Jews (especially in Tehran, Hamadān, and Kāšān) constantly fought against this method of education; it was changed after 1921, with more emphasis given to Persian and, to a lesser extent, Hebrew. An important factor in the change was the establishment of Zionist organizations in Iran after the Balfour Declaration (November, 1917); Reżā Shah's nationalistic policies also helped. In a letter dated May, 1920, the Zionist Organization of Iran requested the World Zionist Organization in London to establish a Jewish national school in



Iran; it emphasized that the World Zionist Organization should prevent the Alliance from continuing its non-Jewish and non-nationalistic methods of teaching (Zionist Archives in Jerusalem Z4/2004). The newspaper *Ha-Geulah*, the main publication of the Zionist Organization in Iran criticized the Alliance (nos. 16 to 19, 22-23 September 1921) because its graduates did not know Persian or enough French; they were unable to follow in their fathers' business, nor could they be employed in new types of work. Despite this, the Alliance took effective steps, in cooperation with high state officials, to protect the life and property of Iranian Jews and to restrain the missionary activities of other faiths.

*From 1921 to 1941* (the period of Reżā Shah). The Iranian Jewish community increased its involvement with the Alliance schools by forming the Comité scolaire. The Alliance budget deficit was secured primarily through taxes on individuals of the Jewish community. The Jewish community also established new schools independent of the Alliance (e.g., the Cyrus school of Rašt, 1922, and the Cyrus in Tehran, 1931), a program compatible with the nationalistic policies of Reżā Shah and aided by the Ministry of Education. In 1926 teaching in the Persian language in foreign schools was made compulsory; from this year onward the doors of national schools were opened to Jewish students more than ever before. By this time the number of Alliance schools had reached 15 with 6,500 students.

*From 1941 until the revolution of 1979.* After the defeat of France and the exile of Reżā Shah in 1941, the Iranian Alliance schools were gradually removed from the jurisdiction of the central committee in Paris and came under the protection of American Jewish organizations, especially Joint. Moreover, the establishment of the State of Israel resulted in the emigration of more than 65,000 Iranian Jews; at the same time a large number of Jews migrated from the provinces to Tehran.

In 1977 the number of students at Alliance schools was as follows: Tehran, 7 schools, 1,800 students; the following cities each had one school: Hamadān, 673 students (173 Jews); Kermānšāh, 314 students (171 Jews); Sanandaĵ, 140 students (39 Jews); Borūĵerd, 145 students (101 Jews); Yazd, 154 students (all Jews); Isfahan, 435 students (all Jews). Tehran had two schools up to the 12th grade, which were established in 1950; until then Jewish schools lacked two intermediate grades. The Alliance schools in the towns of Shiraz, Kāšān, Nehāvand, Tūyserkān, and Golpāyagān had closed a few years after being opened; most of these schools were established before World War I except for



that of Yazd, which was founded in 1928. By this time, a number of other Jewish schools were also functioning in Iran, mostly in Tehran, including Otzar ho-Torah (17 schools and 3,500 students), ORT (1,000 students), Ettefāq (1,200 students), Cyrus (700), Abrišamī (300), Rūḥī Šād (160), and Šaybānī in Shiraz (250).

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