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ARMENIANS OF MODERN IRAN

ARMENIANS OF MODERN IRAN. Armenians can be found in almost every major city of Iran, engaged in a variety of professions and occupations, as university professors, physicians, high-school teachers, businessmen, engineers, skilled workers, truck drivers, artists, technicians, artisans, professional athletes, etc. Their traditional centers of Azarbaijan and Isfahan (since the 11th/17th century) have been overshadowed in recent years by the tremendous growth of the Armenian population in Tehran, where more than 66 percent of the entire community (estimated at 270,000 in 1977, see Nyrop, *Iran*, p. 152) resided in 1345 Š./1966 (Firoozi, *The Population of Iran*, p. 346). Three prelates with jurisdiction over the three district areas of Azarbaijan, Isfahan (including southern Iran and India), and

Tehran (including Qazvīn, Rašt, Mašhad, Bandar-e Anzalī, Hamadān, Arāk, and Kermānšāh) head the community. They are subject to the catholicos of Cilicia in Lebanon who nominates three candidates for each prelate post out of which one candidate is elected by the assembly of local representatives; then the elected prelate is officially appointed as such by the catholicos (Rāʾīn, *Īrānīān–e Armanī*, pp. 61-62). The Iranian community traditionally acknowledged the jurisdiction of the catholicos of Echmiadzin (Vałaršapat, the ancient capital of Armenia, now in Soviet Armenia) until the 1950s, when for political reasons he was replaced by the catholicos of Lebanon. This led to a split in the Armenian community, since a large number continued to follow the catholicos of Echmiadzin, who refused to relinquish the jurisdictional claim of his church over the entire Iranian community (Nyrop, *Iran*, p. 135).

Each prelate functions as the top executive and religious authority in his community and is assisted in discharging his duties by a special church council which he chairs. The members of this council are nominated by the assembly of representatives (usually one representative for every 2,000) which, as a kind of legislative organ, is elected every four years by popular vote to regulate the internal affairs of the community. There is also a National Armenian Committee that represents the community as a whole and is charged with the protection of its interests.

The great majority of Iranian Armenians follow the traditional Gregorian church of Armenia, but other denominations also exist. There are Catholics (their church in New Julfa [Jolfā], Arm. Nor Jutay, dates from 1705), Carmelites (a very small number), Protestants and Sabbatarians (Šanbadār). Some, mainly in Azarbaijan, also follow the Eastern Orthodox church, but their number is insignificant. The Sabbatarians although apparently the least numerous (ca. 50 followers in New Julfa in 1312 Š./1933), are quite active and, thanks to the financial support they receive from their parent organization in the U.S.A., they have been able to maintain a relatively extensive area of organizational activity. Their flourishing financial situation has also attracted members of other denominations (Jawāher-Kalām, *Zanda–rūd* I, pp. 77-78; Rāʾīn, op. cit. pp. 71-73).

Since the mid-19th century, Armenians had schools of their own where Armenian was the only language of instruction, with Persian and French taught as foreign languages. These schools were closed down in 1936 by the order of Reżā Shah during his vigorous campaign for the Persianization of all educational establishment in Iran. They were allowed to reopen in 1943, but government directives prohibited the use of Armenian as the language of instruction except in religion, for which eight to ten hours per week were provided. The Armenian language suffered as a result; it was still the major, and often the only, language of oral communication in the community, but awareness of Armenia history and culture, as well as the number of qualified teachers in these subjects, generally declined. The prospects looked better in the early 1960s when the University of Isfahan started offering undergraduate courses in Armenian history, language, and literature, with the intention of training qualified school teachers in these subjects. Still more encouraging was the establishment of an Armenian section in the Graduate Faculty of the University of Tehran in 1970. A two-year graduate program leading to an M.A. degree was offered with courses in Classical Armenian, the History of

Armenian Literature, the history of Armenian philosophy, the Armenian Church, Armenian architecture, etc.

The Armenian contribution to the overall configuration of the 20th-century Iranian society, both culturally and economically, is significant. Armenians were pioneers in photography, theater, and the film industry. The first movie theater to open in Iran (Tabrīz, 1916) belonged to Alex Sagīnīān (Sahinyan), an Armenian who used the hall in the French mission of Tabrīz as "Cinéma Soleil," in which Russian and European films were shown to an enthusiastic audience. They were among the first to introduce Western music and dance to the Iranian public. The popularity of modern fast-food establishments in Iran owes much of its original success to the daring enterprise and perseverance of the Armenian businessmen who first introduced them in the Muslim society of Iran several decades ago. Armenian athletes have represented Iran in international tournaments, particularly boxing, weightlifting, soccer, and volleyball.

Armenians of Azarbaijan. Azarbaijan, particularly its northwestern regions, has the oldest history of Armenian settlement in Iran. Forming a part of historical Armenia, many of its major towns, such as Tabrīz, Ḵoy, Urmia, Marāḡa, had a large Armenian population until quite recently, while a number of villages had long been settled entirely by Armenians. The Armenian diocese of Azarbaijan has its center in Tabrīz (Arm. Dawrēz), the largest town in the province and the administrative capital of eastern Azarbaijan, which had a thriving Armenian community of about 6,000 souls at the turn of the century. Armenians were concentrated in the two neighborhoods of Ḡala (Arm. Berdaṭʿał) and Lilava, collectively called Armanestān by Persians. Each district had a church of its own. The church of St. Astuacacin in Ḡala, the oldest church in Tabrīz (founded in 1196/1782), was run by a senior priest assisted by another priest who worked under him. Adjacent to this church now is a museum founded in the memory of Melik Tangian, the primate of Azarbaijan (1912-48) and named after him. The more modest church of St. Sargis in Lilava was run by a single priest.

Armenians can be considered pioneers of "modern," Western-type education in Azarbaijan. Their first school in Tabrīz dates from 1270/1854 (*Īrānšahr* II, p. 1193). They had an elementary school and a kindergarten in each of the two districts, all co-educational and with libraries of their own. The one at Lilava was later expanded to include nine grades. Another kindergarten, a private one, was later added in the same district. Teachers as well as school principals

and their assistants had received degrees from Gevorgyan College of Echmiadzin or similar institutions. Besides Armenian, French, Russian, and Persian were also taught. Funds were provided partly by the taxes that the diocese levied on the community for this purpose. Later in 1909 a secondary school was founded—Armenian Central High School of Azarbaijan. Except for one year of interruption during World War I, this school continued to serve the community until 1936, when by the order of Reżā Shah all non-Persian schools, including those run by missionaries, were closed down throughout Iran.

The Armenians of Tabrīz had a number of associations engaged in philanthropic and cultural activities as well as organized groups with political ambitions. Among the first philanthropic associations to appear in Azarbaijan was the Armenian Women's Benevolent Association of Tabrīz, which was founded in 1891 for the purpose of providing financial aid for needy students. Later it became a source of relief for the Armenian refugees seeking shelter in Iran. It also founded a kindergarten and a school of handicrafts in the Lilava district. There were also The Charity Association of Tabrīz, The Armenian Relief Society (HOM), and The Cultural Association of Tabrīz. The latter, founded in 1916 by a group of Armenian intellectuals, intended to promote Armenian culture by organizing lectures, debates, conferences, and artistic activities (shows, dances, etc). Using the facilities at the Central High School, it soon expanded its activities, which generated enough funds to establish a number of scholarships. It also founded a library, named Rostam Gaspar Library, which was located in the same school and had about 10,000 volumes of printed books and scores of manuscripts. The manuscripts were later donated to the Republic of Armenia. The closing of the Armenian schools in 1936 delivered a severe blow to the Cultural Association, whose activities had been already constrained by constant pressure from the government. It finally ceased to exist in 1937 and its library became the property of the church.

The Armenians of Azarbaijan had two major political organizations, often at odds with each other. The larger and more aggressive one was The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), which had been active in Iran since the 1890s and drew most of its support in Tabrīz from Lilava district. It was mainly involved in providing a secure passage for the transportation of weapons and fighters from Caucasus to the Armenian section of the Ottoman empire, using the sanctuaries of St. Thaddeus near Mākū and St. Stephen on the Aras (Araḵs) river as its bases of operation. It even operated one arms factory in Tabrīz. It

also published in Tabrīz the weekly *Aravat* (1909-12), the monthly *Ḡarabar*, later changed to *Ḡaradāḡ* (1913-14), and the weekly *Ayg* (1914-20), which replaced *Aravat* as the organ of the organization. There was also the weekly youth magazine *Aršaloys*, published by the young members of ARF.

The second organization, the Social Democrat Hn̦čak Party, was smaller, less organized, and often opposed to the tactics used by ARF. It lost its control over the Armenian school in the Ḡala district when in 1919 the ARF members formed the majority in the Board of Trustees. The party finally ceased to exist in 1960.

Other regions of Azarbaijan with a significant Armenian population in this century are: The village of Mūǰūmbār at a distance of about 40 km north of Tabrīz, which used to serve as a summer resort for the Armenians of this city. It has an old church (St. Hṙipʿsime), a small chapel adjacent to it, and a holy place of pilgrimage. Its entire population emigrated to Soviet Armenia in 1946-47.

Ḵoy (Arm. Her), ca. 150 km northwest of Tabrīz with its monumental churches of St. Sargis (near the town of Ḵoy), St. Thaddeus/Qara Kelīsā (in Artaz), and St. Stephen (on the Aras). Legend dates the foundation of St. Thaddeus church to the 4th century (Rāʾīn, op. cit., p. 76). It is the scene of an annual pilgrimage procession in the month of July in which thousands of the faithful participate. The pilgrimage is arranged by the Diocesan Council. The church was the scene of the heroic resistance of Armenians against the invading Ottoman army in 1917-18, during which the Armenian population of the region was decimated. Entire settlements were massacred or fled to Russia and the interior of Iran. The return of some families after the war was not enough to revive the past, and when the last priest of St. Thaddeus emigrated to Soviet Armenia in 1948, the Armenian character of the region was lost completely (Rāʾīn, op. cit., pp. 73-78). Other once Armenian settlements of the region include Dīzaǰ (Diza), Vār, Pera (Pʿra), Seydanvar, and Mahlazān. According to Razmārā, not a single Armenian resided in the town of Ḵoy (*Farhang* IV, p. 201).

Salmās (class Arm. Zarewand), a suburban district of Ḵoy; it was renamed Šāhpūr in 1309 Š./1930 upon the reconstruction of its major town, Dīlmaqān/Salmās (Šāhpūr), after it was devastated by an earthquake. It had a thriving Armenian population spread in about 200 villages, with schools that dated from as early as the 1880s. The 19th-century Armenian novelist Yakob Melik Yakobyan (Raffi) was born in this district in the village Pʿayaǰūk. The

Armenians who fled this district during the Ottoman invasion of Azarbaijan in World War I, chose Tabrīz as their new hometown when they returned. Villages with at least one church are: Haftvān, Derīš (Drišk), Ḵosrova, Sawra, Kohna-šahr, Haḵviran, Aṣlānīk, Kʿealakan, Payaǰik (Pʿayaǰūk), Qaḷʿa-sar (Łalasar), Qezelǰa, Malḥam (Mahlam), Sarna, Saramerī (Sarameri), Hovadar, Čara, Ḡarabāḡ, Ayān, and Vardān. Jamalava, Čarvaš, Rava, Īkī-āḡāǰ, Šīrābād, Qarāǰalū, Sopūrḡān, Āda, Naḵǰevān-tapa, ʿĪsālū, Giardābād, Baḡbayh, Dīgāla, Āḡǰa-qaḷʿa, Dīzaǰ-taka, Tūmatar, Kiukia, Naqada, Geornava, Aḡbeglū, and Moḥammad-yār in Urmia (class. Arm. Kaputan), Aʿqān (Agāgān), Orgotīn (Urgīūtīn), Qašlāq, Sardū, Ḵānaqāh, Ḡūlūdī, Šawlī, Norašen, Oḡa, Ogān, Klala, Germanaw, Mikidi, Nepešd, Vinana, Sevahoḡ, Karaglūḵ, Amradūl, Sūrūn/Sīrūn, and Ḡasumašen in the Qarabāḡ region.

Julfa. Julfa or New Julfa, a small township earlier adjacent to, but now a part of Isfahan, is the traditional seat of the Armenian diocese of southern Iran and India. The history of this township, the only in recent memory to have been built and occupied by an entirely Christian community in Iran, dates from the early 11th/17th century (1605) when thousands of Armenian families were forced by the order of the Safavid Shah ʿAbbās I to leave their homes in eastern Armenia, which was then devastated by the Safavid Army fighting the Ottomans. About 60,000 families are said to have been uprooted in bitter winter cold from the prosperous, commercial town of Old Julfa on the Aras and its surrounding areas. They were driven in forced march across the river and into the hinterland of Iran. Many perished on the road and thousands died from the unhealthy condition of their new areas of settlement (e.g., in Gīlān). Finally about three thousand families reached Isfahan, where by royal decree they were given large grants of land across the river Zāyanda-rūd to the south of the capital. There they built a new township which they called (New) Julfa in memory of the old Julfa on the Aras river (Lang, *The Armenians*, pp. 81-87). The forced emigration continued for several more years, bringing thousands of Armenians, among them many skilled craftsmen and businessmen experienced in international trade, to Isfahan and its countryside. Under the patronage of Shah ʿAbbās I and his successors, who appreciated their talents and expertise, New Julfa soon turned into a thriving center of craftsmanship and international trade. But prosperity was short-lived as instability and internecine war followed the fall of the Safavid dynasty (Carswell, *New Julfa*, pp. 3-15). In 1312 Š./1933 when Jawāher-Kalām toured the town, there were less than 4,000 Armenians living in about 200 homes in New Julfa, divided into eight quarters (*maḥalla*s) mentioned also on Carswell's map.

Streets were narrow and marked by wooden gates that were closed at night. The eight quarters were: Tabrīzīān to the south (140 homes, 924 people), the largest quarter in New Julfa; Sangtarāšān (Kočer) to the south, known as Gabrābād before the Armenian settlement (100 homes, 610 people); Meydān-e Bozorg, to the northeast (88 homes, 481 people); Čahārsū (or Čārsū) in the center of town (82 homes, 549 people); Īravān (i. e., Erevan), to the west (73 homes, 447 people); Meydān-e Kūček to the north (59 homes, 322 people); Hākobīān (Hakobjanenc), to the north (47 homes, 299 people); Qārāyel, center of the town (23 homes, 116 people). There were also 20 homes (with ca. 120 residents) on the opposite sides of the newly built Naẓar Street, which ran to the north of the town in an east-west direction parallel to Zāyanda-rūd. A hospital was being built on this street (Jawāher-Kalām, op. cit., pp. 91-93; cf. Carswell, loc. cit. and pp. 18, 75; Bradley-Birt, *Persia*, p. 268; C. Rice, *Persian Women*, pp. 30-31). There were four elementary schools, a kindergarten, and a secondary school, the first “modern” school dating from 1843. The secondary school belonged to a co-educational school system run by the Gregorian Armenians, which included an elementary school and a kindergarten and which had a total enrollment of 850 students. It had in 1312 Š./1933 a library of about 4,000 books and magazines. Funds were provided by Indian-Armenian foundations (in Calcutta), supplemented by local donations. A board of directors, elected annually, was responsible for school management. Protestant Armenians also had a co-educational elementary school (founded in 1873), with an inbuilt chapel and an enrollment of just over one hundred. The third elementary school belonged to the Catholics and had a student body of only fifty girls while the fourth one, Dabestān-e ʿAṣr-e Pahlavī (founded 1302 Š./1923 and the only public school in Julfa), had a mixture of Armenian and Muslim boys and was the only institution in Julfa where Persian was being taught with any seriousness. Reference is also made to an Armenian lady who held private classes for Persian language, rug weaving, and tailoring (Jawāher-Kalām, op. cit., pp. 77-78, 94, 95-97, 99-100; *Īrānšahr* II, p. 1193). Today there are three elementary (one for girls and two for boys) and two mixed secondary schools for boys and girls besides a kindergarten (founded 1896) that recently moved to new headquarters. In the early 1970s both Persian and Armenian were used in the classrooms, although Persian was the primary language used at the secondary level. French and English were offered as foreign languages. The total number of students is given as 1,520 in 1972. In the same year Julfa had a hospital (with fifty beds) and two infirmaries attended by two Armenian doctors and a Persian chief physician. There were also three Armenian dentists and two pharmacies (Bémont, *Les villes* II, p. 93).

An orphanage and a nursing home for the elderly are also reported.

Under the protection of the Safavid court, New Julfa soon assumed the Christian character that it still has today. The first church was built in 1606-07, only one year after the arrival of Armenians in Isfahan, and by 1664 there were already twenty churches serving the community. Out of some thirty churches that the town had at the turn of the 18th century, now only thirteen are standing, four in the quarter of Meydān-e Bozorg, two in the Čārsū quarter, and one each in the quarters of Meydān-e Kūček, Īravān, Sangtarāšān, Tabrīzīān, Qārāyel, Hākobīān, and Ḵīābān-e Naẓar.

Julfa, despite its full integration into the city of Isfahan and despite the unscrupulous modernizing trend of the past two decades that has destroyed many of its old buildings, has maintained some of its traditional charm. Its population was estimated in the early 1970s at about 8,000 including a small number of Muslims, some Protestants, and about 100 Europeans. It comprised about 2,000 homes, mostly two-storied and of modest size, the ground floor of some of which was often used as workshops or stores (Bémont, op. cit., II, p. 93; Hureau, op. cit., p. 29). There are still villages around Isfahan with Armenian population. According to Jawāher-Kalām (op. cit., p. 55 n. 1) there were about 20,000 Armenians living in the districts of Farīdan and Čahār Maḥāl(l), but wholesale emigration to Russia in the late 1940s after the catholicos of Soviet Armenia pleaded to all the faithful to repopulate the ancestral homeland devastated by World War II, famine, and the post-revolutionary atrocities in Russia, greatly reduced their number. This trend has not stopped, and still more are attracted to Tehran, where prospects of wealth and social mobility looms even brighter. The current population of Julfa is to a very great extent, if not all, made up of former villagers. There is hardly a single family that can trace its background to the original settlers of Julfa in the 17th century.

In the last two decades there has been a new awareness of the historical-cultural significance of Julfa and its Armenian community. In the early 1960s the University of Isfahan established its own Center of Armenian Studies, which is supported by generous private donations. Courses were offered in Armenian language, history, and literature. It had fifty-three registered students in the early 1970s, of which forty-three were Armenian and two were Muslim. There were ten more Armenian students studying in other departments of the university (two studying medicine, three science, and five literature). Every year, about ten high-school graduates left Julfa for further

studies in Europe and the U.S.A. (Bémont, op. cit., II, p. 93; Lenczowski, ed., *Iran under the Pahlavis*, Stanford, Calif., 1978, p. 308). A vigorous campaign has been launched in recent years by the artists A. Gourgenian and S. Khachadourian for the restoration and preservation of the treasures of Julfa, which include some beautiful houses from the Safavid era (for a description of two such houses see Carswell, op. cit., pp. 65-67, 70-71).

Tehran. The Armenian community of Tehran, now by far the largest and the most diversified in the country, had only 1,500 members at the turn of the century. There were only two Armenian churches within the city (St. George and St. Bartholomew) at the gates (*darvāza*) of Shah ʿAbd-al-ʿAẓīm (founded 1235/1820) and Qazvīn (founded 1250/1835), plus a third one (founded 1291/1875) in the suburban village of Vanak. There was only one school for the entire community (*Īrānšahr* II, p. 1193; Rāʾīn, op. cit., pp. 153-54). Later, as the community grew in number and prosperity, several other churches were built, notably those of the Holy Mother of God (Surb Astuacacin, founded 1317 Š./1938) and St. Sargis, which latter also includes the diocesan building. Large-scale migration from Azarbaijan, particularly following the Turkish invasion of that province in World War I, and emigration from Armenia proper following the Russian revolution, rapidly turned Tehran into a haven which eventually held more than 65 percent of the entire Armenian population of Iran. (In 1966, out of the total population of 108,421 Armenians of Iran, 72,121 or 66.52 percent lived in Tehran; see Firoozi, in Momeni, *The Population of Iran*, p. 346). The church of Surb Astuacacin on Nāderī Street and the large number of Armenian businesses (coffee shops, bookstores, delicatessen shops, etc.) gives this street in the heart of Tehran a marked Armenian character.

A Board of Trustees exercises control over a school system that comprises seven elementary and five secondary schools, and is responsible for the coordination of their educational and other activities. Each school owns a library of its own with the largest one belonging to Kūšeš high school. There are also fourteen privately owned Armenian schools whose management and areas of activity lie beyond the Board’s control or supervision. Armenian was the sole language of instruction (Persian, like French, was treated as a foreign language) until 1936, when all non-Persian schools were closed by the government (see above). Armenian suffered as a result and knowledge of Armenian history and culture generally declined among the younger generation. However, in 1961, in order to ameliorate the situation, the church council arranged for a series of lectures given at Kūšeš high school for the

benefit of would-be teachers. Later, the program was expanded to include poorer Armenian neighborhoods as well, but it has been discontinued for some time. As of late efforts have been made by the community leaders, with varying success, to secure the government's permission for the use of Armenian in certain classes. The largest single library of the community belongs to the diocese, which contains about 18,000 volumes mostly in Armenian.

The Armenians of Tehran have long been organized in several cultural, philanthropic, professional, and sports clubs and associations (e.g., The Benevolent Association of Armenian Women, founded 1905), some of which were particularly helpful when the outbreak of World War I challenged the Tehran community with a heavy influx of refugees from Azarbaijan, Turkey, and eventually Russia. However, rivalry and disagreement between the conservative and liberal factions expressed themselves, often with resentful bitterness, within and among these organizations, which finally led to the abolition of all in 1921 by the Community Council. In 1927 the council proposed the formation of The Churchman's Association of the Armenian Women of Tehran; articles of association were drawn up and an executive council was elected; it still operates and has been since its inception, one of the most active organizations in assisting schools and organizing philanthropic events.

The most active cultural organization of the Armenians in the last two decades or so, particularly in youth programs, has been the Ararat Cultural Association. Founded in Tehran in 1946, it soon expanded its organization to establish branches in all provincial towns with sizable Armenian communities. Its membership exceeds 2,000. Its areas of activity involve music, theater, boy- and girl-scout organizations, and literature. It recently acquired a sport stadium of its own with the capacity of 10,000. Other noteworthy active organizations are: The Philanthropic Association of Čahār Maḥāl, Armenian General Benevolent Union (has founded a school in Tehran), Association of the Armenian Writers of Iran (founded 1961), The Association of Armenian University Students (ca. 500 members) with a library and a center of its own, the Association of Armenian University Graduates (culturally very active, runs a free clinic for the poor), The Sipan Cultural-Athletic Association. The Šāh ʿAzīz Club (the last two have sizable youth memberships), The Theater Group of Armenian Youth (founded in the 1940s), and The Alumni Association of Armenian Schools (*Īrānšahr* II, p. 1193; Rāʾīn,

op. cit., pp. 153-54).

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