



GOETHE INSTITUTE

GOETHE INSTITUTE in Persia and Afghanistan. Named after the celebrated German poet and writer, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), the Goethe Institute was founded in 1951 in Munich as a non-profit organization for training foreign teachers of the German language. In the next few years, it began teaching German both inside and outside Germany to the increasing number of foreign students flocking to German universities. Beginning in 1952, cultural institutes to promote German language and culture were set up abroad in cooperation with the foreign ministry. In the late 1960s, the Institute's mission came to include cultural exchange in addition to language training. Since German was not an international language on a par with English and French, the facilities of the Institute had to be made available to local artists, writers, and performers, if interest in Germany and its culture was to be awakened and sustained (Ross, Apelt).

In Persia: Beginning in 1949-50, Persian students began returning to Germany after the interruption of the war and post-war years (Chehabi, p. 150), and by the 1950s and 1960s West Germany had the highest number of Persian students of any Western country (Arasteh, p. 42). This created a great demand for German language instruction in Persia. At first the Goethe Institute licensed local teachers to teach German using its standardized methods, but in the autumn of 1958 a branch of the Institute was opened in Tehran. While its main mission was language instruction, cultural exchange was also taken seriously. Its library stocked books, records, and films that were made available to the public. The Goethe Institute co-sponsored chamber concerts



for touring musicians in collaboration with the Philharmonic Society (Anjoman-e filhārmonik) at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Tehran, and it also showed films, arranged lectures, set up exhibitions, and facilitated reunions of the alumni of German universities. Persian artists were invited to perform or exhibit on the Institute's premises, which, given the scarcity of concert stage and galleries in Tehran, was a welcome contribution to the cultural life of the capital. In 1970, according to that year's *Jahrbuch* of the Goethe Institute, 10,500 visitors attended these cultural events in Tehran.

In the mid-1970s, the oil boom led to an intensification of contacts between Persians and Germans. A branch of the Institute was opened in November 1975 in Shiraz, and in 1976 Persian language courses for the growing number of German expatriates were introduced in Tehran. In 1977-78 the Goethe Institute in Persia organized ninety-two cultural and scientific events, seventeen exhibitions, and eighty-five film screenings, and over a thousand Persians enrolled in language classes.

The most memorable event of all was a series of ten lectures and poetry readings held between 10 and 19 October 1977. Poetry readings had regularly been held at the Institute in previous years, but in 1977, for the first time, the Persian partner was not the government-sponsored Literary Society of Tehran (Anjoman-e adabi-e Tehrān), but the oppositional Writers' Association of Iran (Kānun-e nevisandagān-e Irān). This association had originally been founded in 1968 but had to cease all activity in 1970 (Karimi-Hakkak, pp. 189-202), until, as part of the political liberalization carried out during Jamšid Āmuzegār's premiership, it was allowed to hold meetings again. The "Ten Nights" (*dah šab*), as they came to be known, took place at the German Cultural Institute on Pahlavi Avenue, the premises of the Goethe Institute having been deemed too small for the expected audience. However, on the first night, so many showed up that even this venue proved inadequate, and the crowd spilled over into neighboring streets, where loudspeakers were set up to broadcast the proceedings. Up to ten thousand attended the first few nights, but then it started to rain and the numbers went down to about three thousand (Scharf). Weather conditions did not dampen the crowd's enthusiasm, however, and over fifty writers, poets, playwrights, critics, and translators aroused the listeners "to a peak of emotional communion unprecedented in Iranian cultural history" (Karimi-Hakkak, p. 209) as they spoke of censorship, freedom of thought, the responsibilities of intellectuals, inequality, and oppression, thus turning a literary event into a political one. Even though armed personnel



carriers surrounded the area, no violence occurred (Becker), and the Ten Nights became the first in a series of mass protest meetings that culminated in the Revolution of 1979. The tapes made of the Ten Nights were copied and sold in thousands both in Persia and abroad, and the speeches and poems were published as a book (Mo'adden).

After the revolution, it became increasingly difficult for the Goethe Institute to function. Its language course still attracted over a thousand students a year, but its cultural activities were reduced to a few lectures, exhibitions, and private gatherings at the house of the director. In late 1987, the Institute was forced to close down by the Persian government.

In Afghanistan: The Kabul branch was established in 1965, and its offerings were similar to those of the Tehran Institute. During the 1960s and 1970s between 50 and 800 students were enrolled in language classes each year, but this number declined to about 200 per year in the 1980s as the war in Afghanistan intensified. In the autumn of 1988 all activities ceased.

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All statistics are from the yearbooks (*Jahrbuch*) of the Goethe Institute.