



POLAK, JAKOB EDUARD

POLAK, Jakob Eduard (b. 12 November 1818 in Mořina (Groß Morzin), Czech Republic; d. 8 October 1891 in Vienna), Austrian physician and writer who was instrumental in establishing modern medicine in Iran ([FIGURE 1](#), [FIGURE 2](#)). From 1851 to 1860, he taught medicine at the Dār al-fonun, and from 1855 to 1860, he served as personal physician of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (r. 1848-96). He summarized his experiences in the study *Persien: Das Land und seine Bewohner* (1865), which belongs to the outstanding ethnographic works about 19th-century Iran.

Life. He was born into a Jewish family in Bohemia, which was part of the Habsburg empire. He studied philosophy and medicine in Prague and Vienna where he obtained degrees in medicine (Dr. med. 1845) and surgery (Dr. chir. 1847), and was trained in obstetrics/gynecology (Magister 1849). After 1845 he worked for a year at Vienna's General Hospital (*Allgemeines Krankenhaus*, that is: *AKH*), and was then for two years factory physician in a sugar refinery plant in Klobauk (Valasske Klobouky), Moravia. From 1848 to 1849, he was again employed at Vienna's General Hospital (Wurzbach, p. 73; cf. Hāšemiān, p. 12).

His life took an unexpected turn when in 1851 Jān Dā'ud Khan visited Vienna to recruit, on the behest of [Mirzā Taqi Khan Amir Kabir](#) (1807-52), teachers for the new Dār al-fonun. Dā'ud Khan's contact in the Foreign Ministry was Heinrich von Barb (Slaby, pp. 58, 69), who from 1852 until 1867 was professor of Persian at the Vienna Polytechnic Institute (*K.K. Polytechnisches Institut*). Polak was hired as professor of medicine and pharmacy; the initial contract



for four years is dated 10 August 1851. After an arduous journey over Istanbul and Armenia he arrived with six colleagues—among them the artillery officer and geographer August Křziž (1814-86)—on 24 November 1851 in Tehran. Their arrival coincided with the downfall of Amir Kabir, and their official reception was cold, since nobody felt responsible for them (Polak, 1865, I, pp. 300-301). The men were not considered an official Austrian delegation, because at that time Austria did not maintain diplomatic relations with Persia. British and French diplomats realized the political implications of recruiting non-allied foreigners for the new military college, and treated them with enmity (*Ādamiyat*, pp. 356-60). But despite the changed political circumstances, the *Dār al-fonun* was inaugurated a month after Polak's arrival, and the work began. Polak became one of the most successful instructors at the *Dār al-Fonun*. Initially he taught in French with the help of his translator Moḥammad Ḥosayn Khan Qājār (*Waqāye'-e ettefāqiya*, no. 98, 5 Rabi' I 1269 [17 December 1852]), who may be identical with Adib-al-Dawla (1835-97). But soon Polak taught in Persian, and wrote even medical textbooks in Persian. Though Polak (1865, I, pp. 303, 312, 319) did not have many students—he gives their number as 14—they graduated successfully, and seven continued their medical education in Paris.

In January 1852, after the death of Fortunato Casolani (1819-52), who was from a British family in Malta and had served as the general supervisor of all military physicians, Polak was appointed to this largely ceremonial position. Three years later he succeeded [Louis-André-Ernest Cloquet](#) (1818-55) as personal physician of Nāṣer-al-Dīn; the official appointment in 1272/1855 was recorded as “manṣab-e ḥakimbāšigari-e ḥożur-e homāyun” (*E'temād-al-Salṭana*, 1988, p. 1782). Polak (1865, II, pp. 37, 208) also tutored the shah: he continued the French lessons with which his predecessor had started, and taught the shah geography and history. It bespeaks Polak's integrity that he never attempted to use this position for personal gain, nor was he ever accused of joining any political faction. In 1860, Polak (1865, I, p. 316) left Iran after nine years, in his own words, without hate or love (“sine odio et amore”). The summary of his last conversation with the shah on 25 April 1860 (Polak, 1865, I, pp. 316-18) shows concern for his professional future, as well as disenchantment with his employer, notwithstanding that he had received the Star of the Lion and the Sun, second rank.

After an extended stay in Egypt Polak returned to Vienna. He practiced medicine, and in 1862 he got married (marriage contract, personal archives of



Yakoov Polak ARC 4° 1597, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, Israel). Polak worked again at the General Hospital, and later at a sanatorium in the health resort Bad Ischl in Upper Austria. But he also taught Persian at the University of Vienna, served as advisor to the Foreign Ministry, and was involved in academic and cultural projects. In 1882, he returned briefly to Iran on a research mission during which he also met with Nāṣer-al-Din. The shah in turn met with Polak during his journeys to Europe. The Habsburg government recognized Polak's services by appointing him "Ritter des Franz-Joseph Ordens" and by awarding him the "Medaille für Wissenschaft und Kunst," while the Geographical Society (*K.K. Geographische Gesellschaft*) made him an honorary member. Polak died in 1891 of dry gangrene (*Altersbrand*), leaving behind his wife Therese.

The introduction of western medicine to Qajar Persia. The first curriculum of the Dār al-fonun was geared toward military training, and western medicine was included because the health care (see [BEHDĀRI](#)) of soldiers was recognized as a crucial aspect of modern warfare. On-site surgery can prevent that soldiers die of minor wounds on the battlefield, and systematic hygiene and quarantine can avert outbreaks of [cholera](#) in the barracks (Afkhami, p. 123). Polak's principal task was the training of a new type of army physicians without antagonizing the established health care professionals. The official state gazette *Waqāye'-ye ettefāqiya* closely monitored Polak's work and the progress of the medical students.

In Iran, Polak (1865, I, p. 306; II, pp. 318, 320) was the first to regularly operate on unconscious patients, and he himself counts a total of 158 bladder stone operations. A detailed report in *Waqāye'-ye ettefāqiya* (no. 99, 12 Rabi' I 1269 [24 December 1852]) was later summarized by [Moḥammad Ḥasan Khan E'temād-al-Salṭana](#) (1843-96): "The removal of bladder stones became widespread through the teaching and care of Doctor Polak, and in one year he alone removed 23 stones, while only one patient died and the rest returned to good health" (1988, p. 1749).

Polak (1865, I, p. 313) is also known as the first physician to have performed a dissection in Iran because in 1854 he did the post-mortem autopsy of his Austrian colleague Zatti to determine the reason of his death. Dissection was considered taboo, and students were reluctant to study human anatomy (see [EBN ELYĀS](#)). Yet Polak (1865, I, p. 306) refused to perform dissection for teaching purposes on executed members of the Babi movement, since he objected to being used as a government tool of defilement and feared



reprisals.

It is disputed as to whether Polak (1865, I, pp. 307-313) can be credited with the construction of the first western hospital (see [BIMĀRESTĀN](#)) in Iran. He writes in detail about his unsuccessful attempt to build a military hospital outside Tehran in 1854. But the *Marizkāna-ye dowlati*, which is mentioned in several other sources, was already established before his arrival (Ebrahimnejad, 2004, pp. 58-59; Mahdavi, p. 174).

Polak created the modern Persian medical terminology (Schlimmer, p. 4). A complete bibliography of his medical writings in Persian has yet to be compiled (for preliminary lists, Azizi, p. 152; Hāšemiān, p. 17). Among his best-known medical works (Polak, 1865, I, p. 307) are the lithographed editions of his anatomy textbook (1854) and an introduction (1857) to surgery and ophthalmology (see [ČAŠM-PEZEŠKI](#)). Several manuscripts and imprints of the very influential 1852 cholera lectures, often cited as *Bimāri-ye wabā* (for the use of the term *wabā*, see [INFLUENZA](#), *EIr* XIII/2, p. 141), are extant, but text and title vary, and the work awaits further investigation. Many texts that are today circulating under Polak's name are in fact his students' lecture notes. Polak was a popular lecturer with a wide audience, and one manuscript of his cholera lectures even found its way into the complete works of the Shaikhi scholar Moḥammad Karim Khan Kermāni (d. 1871/72). The creative contributions of his students should not be underestimated, as they testify to the active process of acquiring medical knowledge (Ebrahimnejad, 2004, p. 117).

At the Dār al-fonun Polak was assisted by several Iranian teachers, and traditional medicine (*tebb-e qadim*) was part of the curriculum (Ebrahimnejad, 2000, p. 176; Rustāi, I, pp. 111-12). It was of ultimate importance that Polak's students continued his work. In 1856, Farruḡ Khan Amin-al-Dawla (d. 1917) accompanied the first three students, among them Mirzā Reżā b. Mirzā Moqim Mostawfi 'Aliābādi Māzandarāni (d. 1877), to Paris, where they obtained doctoral degrees in medicine (Polak, 1865, I, pp. 310-11). Mirzā Reżā defended in 1860 a dissertation about polyuria, and then returned to Iran to teach until his death at the Dār al-Fonun. In 1859, a second group accompanied the mission of Ḥasan 'Ali Khan Garrusi Amir Neżām (1821-99). At the Dār al-fonun the Dutch physician Johann Louis Schlimmer (1819-81) was appointed to Polak's position, while Joséph-Désiré Tholozan (1820-97) succeeded him as Nāser-al-Din's personal physician.



Ethnography of Qajar Persia. Polak was in numerous ways a communicator of Iranian culture and civilization. He traveled widely in Iran, pursuing his scientific interests in geography, geology and botany. The lasting achievement of his nine-year residence is a report, which the subtitle classifies as ethnographic sketches. Polak thus distinguished his book from the bulk of European travel literature on Iran. Unfortunately, the title of the 1982 Persian translation—*Safar-nāma-ye Polak*—is misleading, and any researcher is advised to consult the German original, whose reprint is in press.

Polak wrote neither a travelogue nor an impartial academic description of Persia. Well-informed because of his access to various social groups and his excellent knowledge of Persian, Polak treats many topics, ranging from the characteristics of the Persian bath to the breeds of Iranian horses. The discussed issues include: food and cooking; clothing; sleep and sports; family life and sexuality; servants and slaves; education and culture; law and religion; cemeteries; Nowruz celebrations; Nāṣer-al-Din's government and court; travel and infrastructure; public security; industry, commerce, and agriculture. Polak (1865, I, p.265) also documents expressions of the local dialect around Natanz, which the important Iranist [E. G. Browne](#) (1862-1926) would later mention in his memoir *A Year amongst the Persians* (p. 204). Polak (1865, II, pp. 192-348) devoted five chapters to exclusively medical topics. He describes the various health care professionals, their income, status and methods of treatment, as well as narcotics, poisons, and antidotes. He provides an encyclopedic list of common diseases, followed by a practical section on travel advice for foreigners, even including psychological problems of acculturation (Polak, 1865, II, pp. 349-60). Although he is not completely free from Orientalist misconceptions and remains strongly convinced of the overall superiority of the West, his detailed observations are extremely valuable. His medical practice allowed him to gain unique insights into Qajar society. For example, Polak (1865, I, p. 204) soberly notes the occurrence of a perineal tear in girls as resulting from marriage before puberty—nowadays this is considered child rape.

Austro-Iranian relations. After his return to Vienna Polak was soon recognized as an expert on Iran because of his various publications. Since the Persian government frequently turned to him as mediator and spokesman, the Austrian Foreign Ministry also began to recruit his help. The posthumously published phrase book plus grammar ([FIGURE 3](#)) shows his excellent grasp of the Persian language.



In 1882, Polak returned to Iran to explore with the help of Thomas Pichler (1824-1914) and Franz Wähler (1856-1932) the botany of the Alvand range (*ALVAND KUH*). During the short trip, he stayed in Tehran with his successor Dr. Tholozan, and the shah was glad to receive him (E'temād-al-Salṭana, 2000, p. 179). Otto Stapf (b. 1857) published the results of this expedition in 1885. In the same year, Polak helped to fund a geological research mission, whose samples of minerals and fossils were later donated to Vienna's Natural History Museum (*Naturhistorisches Museum*; cf. Eiselt).

Polak played a leading role in the representation of Persia at the 1873 Vienna World's Fair (Slaby, pp. 112-13). In 1870, Nāṣer-al-Din received an official invitation for Iran's participation, which he regarded as a unique opportunity for his first tour of Europe. Polak arranged a committee to organize the Persian contributions, and Austrian plans for a diplomatic mission in Tehran were revived. Polak supervised the collection of the exhibits, and his personal contacts ensured that the Persian pavilion was realized. He also wrote the exhibition catalogue (1873). In 1891, shortly before his death, Polak ("Farben"; cf. Slaby, pp. 215-16) was involved in the large exhibition of oriental rugs in Vienna. Polak represented both the Habsburg empire and Qajar Persia on international conferences about cholera. In 1866, he was the Austrian delegate to the Third International Sanitary Conference in Istanbul, but in 1874, when the Fourth International Sanitary Conference was convened in Vienna, he was the official Iranian representative. His representation of Iran's position was crucial, since medical views on the potential carriers of the Asiatic cholera conflicted with trade interests. Polak voted against the view that animals could transmit the disease to men (Afkhami, p. 130).

Polak maintained relations with Nāṣer-al-Din after his departure from Iran. In the diary of his first European tour, Nāṣer-al-Din (1998, p. 292) revealed his affection, coupled with a certain nostalgia. In the summer of 1889, the two men met once more in Berlin, during the shah's third trip to Europe, when Polak served as counselor and translator to the Austrian emperor (Nāṣer-al-Din, 1999, p. 230; E'temād-al-Salṭana, 2000, p. 347).

In his book about Persia, Polak provides many details about the Jewish community, but the study does not contain any personal statements about his own Jewish identity. In the contemporary Persian sources, he is unanimously identified as Jew and thus deliberately placed in the historical context of Jewish physicians in Iran. Polak was very concerned about the plight of the Iranian Jews, and contacted after his return to Vienna in the early 1860s the



Alliance Israélite Universelle, which in 1898 established its first school in Tehran (Fischel, 1950, p. 128, no. 32; cf. Fischel, 2007). Jakob Eduard Polak navigated with great success between different cultures: he worked on the spread of modern medical knowledge in Iran, while the carefully balanced views of his publications contributed to a sympathetic understanding of Persian culture in western Europe.

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