



SEMINO, BARTHÉLÉMY

SEMINO, Barthélémy (b. Nice, France, 19 November 1797; d. Izmir, Turkey, 14 July 1852), French general, engineer, and linguist in the service of the Qajars in Persia. He was born to a French mother and Sardinian father in Nice, due to the fact that his father was the consul from Liguria, a region in northwestern Italy with Genoa as its main city. Semino was a colorful military figure and one of the group of foreigners who not only lived in Persia in the 19th century, for approximately 25 years, beginning in 1824, but also left behind descendants who for all intents and purposes were native Persians. The period of Semino's stay in Persia covered the reign of three Qajar kings: Fath-ʿAli Shah, [Moḥammad Shah](#), and Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (q.v.). He was involved with various military and diplomatic expeditions that took place under all three, but had a different relationship with each; therefore, his challenges and his position in society varied from reign to reign.

After graduating from various elementary and secondary schools Semino graduated from the military school of Naples and joined Napoleon's army. Like many other Bonapartist officers who did not wish to serve the Bourbons, Semino spent some years in Russia engaged in diverse occupations after the fall of Napoleon. Eventually he was advised by his doctor to go to Tabriz, due to his health issues and the locale's favorable climate (Etteḥādiya et al., eds., p. 19).

In Tabriz, where he started his Persian career, he initially worked for the East India Company before coming to the attention of the crown prince [ʿAbbās Mirzā](#) (1789-1833), son of Fath-ʿAli Shah, who invited him to join the Persian



army. The first military campaign in which Semino participated was the Second Russo-Persian war (1826-28). Although the war ended disastrously for Persia, Semino handled himself so well that he was promoted to the rank of colonel, given a medal specially minted for him, awarded the order of Lion and Sun 2nd class, and appointed aide-de-camp to ‘Abbās Mirzā (Raquette, p. 302). After the war he helped a number of Russian prisoners survive starvation and illness. As a result he was given the order of Saint Wladimir de Russie by the Russian government (Ettēhādiya et al., eds., p. 9). After the end of hostilities, he was appointed as the Persian representative to oversee the fate of Armenian refugees of the war (idem, p. 94). From that point on Semino accompanied ‘Abbās Mirzā on all his military expeditions, including the expeditions to Khorasan and the south in 1832 and the siege of Herat in 1833. He also acted in a diplomatic capacity, serving, for instance, as a member of the Persian mission to Russia after the death of Alexander Sergeevich Griboedov (1794-1829) in 1829. Before his return to Persia, Semino received the Russian order of Sainte Anne 3rd class (Ādamiyat, pp. 56, 59; Roquette, p. 303). The French explorer Charles Paulus Bélanger (1805-81), who received a visit from Semino while staying in Tabriz, mentions him as the last remaining French military officer in the service of ‘Abbās Mirzā (Bélanger, II, p. 301).

One of Semino’s many occupations in Russia was printing, and while in Tabriz he was instrumental in bringing the first lithographic press to Iran (Maḥbubi Ardakāni, I, pp. 92, 215). According to some sources (Calmard, pp. 28-29 ; Roquette, p. 307), he also translated Voltaire’s *l’Histoire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand* from French into Persian, accompanied by a number of maps, prepared by Semino, detailing the military campaigns of Peter I and his rival Charles XII of Sweden. According to Maḥbubi Ardakāni, however, a certain Monsieur Jabriel translated the book and Semino prepared the maps (Maḥbubi Ardakāni, I, pp. 226-27).

After the death of ‘Abbās Mirzā, his son Moḥammad Shah continued showing the same confidence in Semino and sent him on various diplomatic and military expeditions. Upon the arrival of the French ambassador Comte de Sercy in Iran in 1840, Moḥammad Shah commissioned Semino with welcoming the ambassador to Persia. Semino accompanied Comte de Sercy, at the head of the guard of honor, to Isfahan, where Moḥammad Shah was in residence (Flandin, pp. 1, 279). In December 1840 Semino also saved Flandin and his companions from great danger when they were en route from Shiraz to Bušehr (idem, pp. 2, 239). Moḥammad Shah also sent Semino on the second



siege of Herat in 1838 (Bāmdād, pp. 2, 128-29; Etteḥādiya et al., eds., p. 152; Tawakkoli, p. 29) . It was during this expedition that he became implicated in the family fortunes of [General Isidore Borowski](#), a Polish officer in the service of ‘Abbās Mirzā. Previously the two men had not been on good terms, but they resolved their differences during the siege of Herat. Before the last battle, Borowski, a wealthy man, informed Semino that his will had been lodged with the Russian consul, [Aleksander Borejko Chodźko](#), in Rasht, and asked Semino to see that his will was executed according to his instructions. Both men were wounded during this battle, Borowski dying from his wounds and Semino recovering. After the siege of Herat Moḥammad Shah raised Semino to the rank of general and gave him the order of Lion and Sun. Subsequently Semino married Borowski’s widow, and for the rest of his life he was involved in trying to retrieve the rightful inheritance of his wife and stepchildren from the Russian consul and his associates, in addition to Borowski’s pension from the Persian government (Etteḥādiya et al., eds., p. 25).

After the death of Moḥammad Shah, Semino was not much in favor with the new king Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, particularly due to the fact that the powerful prime minister Mirzā Taqī Khan Amir Kabir (q.v.) was suspicious of the French (Ādamiyat, p. 289). However, in 1847-50 he did participate in the military expedition to quell the Salar rebellion in Khorasan (ibid.). Due to the unfriendly attitude towards him by everyone, he decided to leave Persia, but was owed back pay by the Persian government. The recovery of his rightful salary in addition to that of Borowski’s estate pitted Semino against the Persian administration and diplomatic corps. These difficulties are recounted in a collection of letters written by Semino beginning December 1843 and ending in April 1852. Aside from a few letters in Italian and two legal documents in Persian, all the letters were originally written by Semino himself in French. The existence of the letters must be due to the fact that Semino had his eye on posterity and kept copies of his letters which have been in the hands of his descendants in Persia. In addition, the letters also cover the Salar rebellion and the state of the Persian army. As far as it is known, he never managed to retrieve his wife’s inheritance or his own back pay.

Initially after his arrival in Tabriz in approximately 1824 Semino married a Kurdish woman, who died during a cholera epidemic while his two daughters were still infants. Later he married the widow of Borowski, by which marriage he had one son and daughter. Semino was an active member of the European community. Semino’s children entered into prominent marriages



within both the Iranian and the foreign communities. His daughter Louise married the Swedish physician [Conrad Gustaf Fagergren](#), and a daughter of Louise married [Albert Houtum-Schindler](#). Another daughter of Semino, Emilie, married Dr. Morel, first secretary and doctor to the French embassy (E'temād-al-Salṭana, p. 916). Semino's son Nicola converted to Islam and, through his marriage to a number of Iranian women, including Gowhar Tāj, from the powerful Qaraguzlu family, became Du'l-feqār Khan Mobaššer-al-Mamālek (Etteḥādiya et al., eds., p. 37).

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