Memories by Jewish Emigrants from Post-1979 Iran

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Background

The Jewish population plays a significant role in Persian history.[1] The first known Jewish settlement in Media dates back as far as 727 BCE, preceding the inception of Islam by over a thousand years.[2] Roughly 80,000 Jews were living in Iran prior to 1978, but by the beginning of 1979, this number dropped to 50,000-60,000.[3] Within one year, about 20,000 Jews had left Iran.[4]

This article discusses the life of Iran's Jewish community before and after the 1979 Revolution, later known as the Islamic Revolution. It concerns two different periods: the first begins with the reforms of Mohammad Reza Shah (who reigned during 1941-1979), and the second ranges from the outset of the 1979 Revolution, to the Ayatollahs' rise to power, to present day.

Mohammad Reza Shah maintained and expanded the reforms established by his father, Reza Shah Pahlavi, which aimed to modernize Iran and unite its citizens by heralding nationalism rather than religion.[5] The Shah's strategy was to separate religion and state

1 Abbas Amanat and Farzin Vejdani, *Iran Facing Others*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2012, p. 219.

2 Massoume Price, "A Brief History of Iranian Jews," *IranOnline*, February 28, 2016, http://www.iranonline.com/History/jews-history/index.html

3 Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 48.

4 David Littman, *Jews under Muslim Rule: The Case of Persia*, Institute of Contemporary History, London 1979, p. 5.

5 Orly R. Rahimyian, "The Pahlavi Era (1925-1979)," in: Houman M. Sarshar (ed.) *Jewish Communities of Iran*, Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, New York 2011, pp. 60-62.

in order to curb the power of Muslim religious leaders.[6] This trend brought Iran closer to the West and led to accelerated modernization processes that benefitted both women and minorities. It is important to note that minority-majority gaps remained apparent and were to some degree sustained by the Shah's regime despite its egalitarian policies.[7] Nonetheless, the regime made significant progress.

While the standard of living among Iranian Jews was low when Reza Shah came to power, during his reign the community rose to a state of prosperity that would later be referred to as the "golden age" of Iranian Jewry. In the late 1960s, Iranian Jews were considered the wealthiest Jewish community in the world.[8] Gradually, they assimilated into Iranian society and gained confidence, and at the time, it seemed they had a bright future in store.

Needless to say, the Shah's reforms were not unanimously supported by the Iranian public, and opposition to them emerged primarily from two polarized social groups: religious conservatives and secular liberals. The secular groups, which attracted some Jewish young adults,[9] advocated for more freedom and democracy.[10] The religious groups on the other hand, opposed westernization and secularization and wished to preserve the power of Muslim institutions.[11] Eventually, this opposition led to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The Revolution was spearheaded by Ruhollah Khomeini, who returned to Iran after 14 years of exile and established the Islamic Republic of Iran, which stands to this day. With the Revolution hijacked by religious extremists, liberal opposition groups had to face a new reality.[12]

The Revolution completely altered the national mindset of Iran.

6 David Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution*, Holmes & Meier, New York 1990, p. 3.
7 Amanat and Vejdani, *Iran Facing Others*, pp. 225-228.
8 Rahimyian, "The Pahlavi Era (1925-1979)," pp. 66-68.
9 Amanat and Vejdani, *Iran Facing Others*, p. 230.
10 Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution*, p. 20.
11 Rahimyian, "The Pahlavi Era (1925-1979)," p. 67.
12 Roger M. Savory, "The Export of Ithna Ashari Shi`ism," in: David Menashri (ed.), *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO 1990, pp. 34-35.

Minorities took a particularly heavy blow, as the new regime was Islamic-oriented and now judged all legal, social, and moral matters according to the Islamic Sharia laws.[13] While Khomeini acknowledged religious minorities such as Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews, these groups did not enjoy the same rights as the Muslim majority.[14]

Jewish representatives allowed into parliament were forced to accept the new government policies in Iran,[15] as were the Iranian Jews who remained in the country. Although Iran still hosts the largest Jewish community of any Islamic country, estimated to include up to 20,000 individuals, the Islamic Revolution was a dramatic turning point for Iranian Jewry, prompting the emigration of 40,000 Jews, the majority of Iran's Jewish population at the time.[16] Jews who remained in Iran were kept "under the government radar" and marked as non-Muslims. The identity of Jews who remained in Iran also changed significantly with the Revolution, with their primary identification shifting to Judaism and their Iranian national identity becoming secondary once again.

The current article focuses on the stories of Jews who lived in Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and left the country at some point following it. By sharing the life experiences of Iranian Jews, the article discusses the Revolution and its consequences through a personal lens.

Methodology – Narrative Interviews

This work is based on qualitative research using open-ended interviews. The open-ended interview is often used in the oral history context and includes a set of questions that guide the exchange between the interviewer and interviewee,[17] allowing the latter to respond as he or she

13 Haleh Esfandiari, "The Majles and Women`s Issues in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in: Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (eds.), *In the Eye of the Storm*, I. B. Tauris, London/New York 1994, p. 63.

14 Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution*, p. 14.

15 Liora Hendelman-Baavur, "The Islamic Republic of Iran (1979-2009)," in: Sarshar (ed.) *Jewish Communities of Iran*, p. 76.

16 Amanat and Vejdani, *Iran Facing Others*, pp. 231-232.

17 Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History*, AltaMira Press, Plymouth, UK 2005, p. 8.

chooses. Rather than assert their prior knowledge or understanding, the researcher using this format approaches the interview with a willingness to learn from the interviewee. The open-ended interview hinges on the interviewee's willingness to tell his or her story and share their subjective experiences, and the interviewer's belief in the value of this contribution.

Seven interviews with eight contemporary witnesses were conducted for the purposes of this study (one of the interviews was given by a couple). Some of the interviewees experienced the Revolution as children and some as adults, with one taking an active role in pre-Revolution demonstrations. The economic background of the interview subjects ranges from low to high, as does their level of employment and education. Most subjects were previous residents of Tehran, with only one hailing from Isfahan; this ensures that they personally experienced the main events of the Revolution, which took place in Tehran. Other than one, all interviewees are current residents of Israel.[18] All original names of interviewees were changed in order to protect their privacy.[19]

By exploring and presenting personal stories, a researcher can reconstruct a given event from the individual perspectives of their interview subjects.[20] While the facts of Iranian history are well known, the effect of this history on ordinary Iranian citizens has yet to be sufficiently understood or investigated. The current study focused on the daily life and education of its subjects, giving members of Iran's Jewish minority the opportunity to share personal accounts of Iranian history. This microhistorical perspective lends a rarely encountered context to widely known, macrohistorical events.[21]

18 See the table in the appendix.

19 Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History*, p. 130.

20 Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA 2012, p. 3.

21 Yolande Cohen, "The Migrations of Moroccan Jews to Montreal: Memory, (Oral) History and Historical Narrative," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 10, 2 (2011), pp. 245-262, here p. 257.

The Daily Life of Jews in pre-Revolution Iran

The emancipation of Iranian Jews, prompted by the aforementioned reforms under the Shah, ultimately made Jewish neighborhoods far less cohesive. With Jews able to work in more places, the security of a tight-knit Jewish community was less needed, and Jews migrated to areas that could benefit them as individuals. This shift was well-articulated in the interviews conducted for this study. For instance, one of the interviewees, Meir, stated, "There was a kind of ghetto. Let's say 90% of Jews lived in the ghetto. Let's say a neighborhood where everyone was Jewish. But later it wasn't like this."[22] Dasi (21 years old at the time of the Revolution) shared that in periods of greater threat, such as that which preceded the Shah's reforms, Iranian Jews maintained a more isolated community in order to protect themselves. This changed in Meir and Dasi's early adulthood.

With the increased dissemination of the Jewish population, their interaction with Iranian neighbors changed as well. Rahel (27 years old at the time of the Revolution), for instance, explains that the neighborhood in which she lived was very mixed; her immediate neighbors were Muslims, and the relations between Muslims and Jews were good.

This dissemination also improved the standard of living for the Jewish population, and led to the so-called "golden age" for Jews in the 1960s-1970s.[23] Before the Revolution, Jews from Iran visited Israel and were thus able to compare their own economic status to that of Israelis. Shirin, who was about six years old at the time of the Revolution, remembers that prior to 1979 Iranian Jews had certain advantages over the population of Israel: "I remember our first visit to Israel… we had a refrigerator from General Electric; they did not have that here [in Israel]; we had a color television; here they did not have it."[24]

All interviewees described Jewish education in Iran as "traditional", but this education did not prepare them for immigrating to Israel. Most were taught Hebrew in order to read religious texts and weekly Torah

22 Interview with Meir, November 2013.

23 Rahimyian, "The Pahlavi Era (1925-1979)," p. 66.

24 Interview with Shirin, January 2014.

portions, but did not have conversational fluency. For instance, one of the interviewees, Nastaran, relayed, "So we knew basic Hebrew, because in the synagogue we read the siddur and the Torah in Hebrew. …But to talk… really not until we immigrated to Israel." Nastaran stated that she did learn to read Hebrew letters: "…you learned it because people wanted you to learn it."[25]

The observance of Jewish rituals was partial. Rahel, for instance, shared that she did not belong to a certain synagogue, and that one would normally go to the nearest synagogue available. Even on Shabbat this was usually done by car, as synagogues were relatively few and spread out. Rahel recalls that while her mother went to the synagogue every Shabbat, her father seldom did so. Rahel herself only went for festivities and special events. This account aligns with that of the author Stanley Abramovitch, who described how Jewish traditions slackened under Pahlavi's reign as the economic status of Jews improved.[26]

Like Rahel, Nastaran stated that her family was not very involved in the Jewish community: "We were not necessarily religious people […] my father wanted us to learn about the world and be worldly people." While she later learned that her grandmother kept a kosher kitchen, Nastaran stated that at the time, her grandmother would have given a rational rather than religious reason for this decision: "If you would ask her, she would have said it was better for your diet […] it was a healthier way of eating, but it was never necessarily tied to religion."

Some interviewees remembered the days before the Revolution, when Iranians dressed in "Western" clothing, and shared that life mainly revolved around Westernization, openness, making changes, and taking advantage of opportunities. "At the time, religion didn`t matter like it does nowadays," shared Nastaran, stating that they were not raised to refuse certain things because they were Jewish. According to the interviewees, the Jewish community tended to see itself as "part of the larger society" and, as Nastaran relayed, most of its members described

25 Interview with Nastaran, July 2013.

26 Stanley Abramovitch, *From Survival to Revival*, Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem 2008, p. 41.

themselves as "Iranian Jews" rather than "Jewish Iranians".[27] In other words, the interviewees saw themselves as a part of an Iranian nation rather than as a Jewish minority.

However, even after the Shah's egalitarian reforms were passed, the Jewish population in Iran did not feel entirely safe. Some chose assimilation as a way to gain more personal security. As Nastaran explains, assimilation did not necessarily mean changing your values, but rather deemphasizing your differences: "It was crucial that one not look different."[28] Therefore, for some, being "part of the masses" meant personal security in Iran, and Iranian Jews in particular needed to show that they were just as Iranian as everyone else.

On the other hand, the quest for security also led some Jews to remain within tight-knit, isolated communities. The need for security was therefore reflected in two seemingly opposing social patterns: life within a closed community, and attempts to assimilate into general society and avoid standing out as a Jew, much like Nastaran had experienced.

Pre-Revolution Education

Based on the interviewees' accounts, it seems that Jews in Iran at the time of the Shah had several options in terms of children's education, including public Jewish or Muslim schools and various types of private schools. Different considerations affected families' choice of schools: from prosaic reasons such as distance and transportation, to preference for remaining within the Jewish community. Sometimes schools were chosen based on curriculum, reputation, or for economic reasons. Therefore, some preferred Jewish education, which included basic Hebrew and religious teachings, while others preferred private schools that were more expensive but better prepared pupils for university.

Yossi, who studied in one of the Jewish public schools in Tehran, stated that, "The government established Jewish schools," which were closed both on Friday, the day of rest for Muslims, and Saturday, the holy

27 Interview with Nastaran, July 2013.

28 Ibid.

day for Jews. Staffing depended on the availability of Jewish teachers. Usually, only Jews attended the schools labeled as "Jewish": "To my knowledge it was not common for a Muslim to go to a Jewish school. Jews went to the Muslim schools," Yossi recalls.[29]

Indeed, some Jews, including Rahel, attended public Muslim schools. Rahel joined a coed public primary school where boys and girls studied together in one class, but for her secondary education she enrolled in an all-girls school. Many Jews in Iran also attended the school established by Alliance Israélite Universelle, a Jewish-French organization that promoted modern education for Jews, especially in Islamic countries.[30] Although it was open to other population groups, the Alliance school attracted strictly Jews, being a private Jewish school. Pupils would generally begin their studies at the age of six and graduate at the age of 18. The school was subsidized by international sources, with parents paying only partial tuition costs.[31] During the 1960s, the Alliance schools underwent a significant change in shifting from a French orientation to an English orientation, as Meir recalls from his years as an Alliance school student.

Tehran also had exclusive private Jewish schools that served the upper class. The Ettefagh and Kourosh schools, for instance, had a prestigious reputation and according to Dasi, were sought after by parents for their high educational standards.[32] In Iran, being accepted into a university was quite challenging, with a limited number of vacancies and a large number of applications that increased annually. The above-mentioned schools, however, improved their graduates' odds of successfully completing university entrance exams:[33] "Very rich people and many of these kids [pupils of the two schools] would go to university afterwards,"

29 Interview with Yossi, November 2013.

30 Amnon Netzer, "Alliance Israélite Universelle," in: Sarshar (ed.) *Jewish Communities of Iran*, p. 315.

31 Abramovitch, *From Survival to Revival*, p. 34.

32 Netzer, "Alliance Israélite Universelle," p. 316.

33 Maryam Poya, *Women, Work and Islamism: Ideology and Resistance in Iran*, Zed Books, London/New York 1999, p. 71.

said Dasi.[34] It is likely that other Jewish pupils chose private, university-oriented schools for much the same reasons.

Nastaran's family is a good and perhaps unique example of a middle class, Western Jewish family that successfully assimilated into Iranian society thanks to the reforms established by the Shah. Her father was a military man, and his generation was in fact the first in which Jews were permitted to join the army.[35] Nastaran shares that her father was sometimes asked to relocate for work. While the family traveled with him at first, it eventually settled down in Tehran, as Nastaran's mother wished to provide the best possible education for her children. Wanting Nastaran and her brother to attend university, their parents enrolled them in a private school that reportedly offered a more structured curriculum and more personal attention for students compared to public schools.

The private school curriculum included the study of a third language other than Persian and Arabic. Nastaran therefore studied English, for which her school had a strong program. She and her brother would also attend an additional English-speaking American school every afternoon from the eighth grade on. Their days began when it was still dark outside and ended when the sun had already set. "So we went to the second school because my dad didn´t believe the English we were learning in our regular private high school was adequate,"[36] Nastaran explained. Her father, who knew English himself, would also test his children from time to time.

Nastaran described the Jewish high school as "too religious", even though it eventually became more open, and shared that this was the reason her father did not want her to study there. As 90 percent of the students in the Jewish high school came from isolated Jewish communities, her father saw the school as overly conformist.

From a young age, Nastaran was pushed to study as much and as quickly as possible and to exceed the accomplishments of her peers. Believing it was the best way to prepare her for the future, her father pressured her to excel. Nastaran's father clearly felt that Jews might

34 Interview with Dasi, November 2013.

35 Rahimyian, "The Pahlavi Era (1925-1979)," p. 61.

36 Interview with Nastaran, July 2013.

not enjoy the same status in the long-term and wanted to make sure his children were prepared:

> "You need to learn or know many skills..." he always said to me, "I want you to know how to work with your hands just in case you are in a situation where your smarts and your intelligence are not allowed; so if you can't work based on your grades, you should be able to support yourself with your hands."[37]

Thus, every summer Nastaran and her young brother were sent to various camps or courses to learn additional skills. Nastaran learned how to sew, work with silk, make flower bouquets, ride a horse, and handle a rifle, which would later save her and her family's lives.

Nastaran and her brother were outstanding students. In her interview, Nastaran explained that her father was a visionary and saw the transformation in the world around them, and it was this that pushed him to support her skill building: "It was just the way my father saw the future of the world, that you needed to be skilled, you know, to know a lot of things…"[38] It seems Nastaran's father tried to prepare his children for whatever the future would bring. He remembered a time in which Jews were not permitted to work for the government, join the military, or attend university, and the way in which Jews were perceived in Iran during Nastaran's childhood appeared to give him the sense that this might recur.

During the period in question, Tehran University was the leading higher education institution in Iran. It had a difficult entrance exam and accepted only a small percentage of its applicants. However, according to Rahel and Nastaran, being accepted into university was more difficult in Iran than actually attaining your degree, unlike in the United States and Israel. Interestingly, the interviewees stated that university entrance exams were not discriminatory at the time, and that the most promising students were accepted regardless of religious affiliation or ethnic background. As mentioned, private school education bettered students' odds of earning a favorable score

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.

on their university entrance exam, as was the case for Meir as well as Nastaran and her brother. On her and her brother's education, Nastaran stated, "He was accepted into Polytechnic University – he now has a PhD in engineering – and I was accepted into Tehran University, into the social sciences and demography [department]."[39] The two graduated from high school in the same year, as her brother skipped one grade.

The Outbreak of Religious Fanaticism

In January 1978, the first official public calls for a new government were heard on the streets of Iran, eventually escalating into the 1979 Revolution against the Shah.[40] Explaining the cause for the demonstrations, Shirin stated:

> [The Shah] pulled Iran in the direction of the West too quickly. … He certainly led a revolution, but he was also a monarch. His prisons were very scary. And he used the "Zavak", the "secret police", if someone was against him.

Yossi on the other hand, claimed that the Revolution was prompted by pervasive illiteracy among Iranians and their ignorance about the world and even specifically Iranian issues. This cultivated a conformist public that was unable to question its leaders, a fact that religious revolutionaries used to their advantage.[41]

As Shirin recalls, speeches by religious revolutionaries had a tremendous psychological impact on the public at the time: "I remember the speeches. I almost wanted to be a Muslim, not that I really wanted to be one, but because of these speeches..." As these

39 Ibid.

40 Shaul Bakhash, "Sermons, Revolutionary Pamphleteering and Mobilisation: Iran, 1978," in: Amir Arjomand (ed.), *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam*, St Antony's/Macmillan Series, Palgrave Macmillan, London 1984, p. 177.

41 Currently, 11 million Iranians out of the total population of about 77 million are illiterate (14%). See: Roja Assadi, "Iran`s Education Ministry looks to cut illiteracy rate," *BBC News Middle East*, January 5, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25339007

revolutionaries introduced their agenda, they reminded the crowd of their heritage, stating that if given power they would make life in Iran even more religious with their policies – a promise that was apparently highly appealing to many of the Iranian people. According to Shirin, the Shah himself did not believe he would be overthrown. He hoped the Iranian people would understand his intentions, but many did not. She also criticized the peaceful surrender of the Shah's regime, comparing it to Israel's humane behavior toward its enemies, and stating that sometimes one must react aggressively to safeguard what they value:

> So I remember the speech by the King [the Shah], who said, "I believe in my people and my people will not rise up against me." He did tell his soldiers not to shoot at anyone. This is what made him fall. Because he could have easily taken care of himself. …and the others were throwing stones and shooting. …and here in Israel the soldiers are also not allowed to shoot, the same thing. The same stupidity, excuse my saying so. …I remember that the soldiers with these roses [civilians gave flowers to soldiers] became part of the people.

As mentioned, different opposition groups including mainly religious conservatives and secular liberals united against the Shah. By the time the liberals realized the implications of the upheaval, it was already too late, and many felt very afraid. At a certain point, Shirin's father and uncle joined the protesters in the streets. Living close to the location of the demonstrations, they feared for their safety: "They went, out of fear, into the streets, so they [the Muslim fundamentalists] would see that we are with them."[42] First, her father and uncle went to the streets to get information and ascertain the sentiments among the people, after which they decided to show support for the revolutionaries. They joined the protesters to make their support visible to those clearly bound to take power.

The Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi left Iran in January 1979, after a wave of demonstrations against him in 1978. This finally gave the exiled Ruhollah Khomeini the chance to return to Iran, which he did in February 1979, and the Shah's monarchy was turned into the Islamic

42 Interview with Shirin, January 2014.

Republic under the reign of Khomeini in April 1979.[43] Following the Revolution and the ensuing changes, the liberal groups regretted their previous actions. Nowadays, the young liberal generation in Iran criticizes its predecessors, as Shirin attests:

> They [the liberals during the Revolution] said… "What did we do to ourselves and what did we do to our children?" Today it is more the students on Facebook and so they say, "What did our parents do to us?" and they were the students back then. So it was out of good intensions.[44]

Daily Life after the Revolution

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Islamic Republic of Iran were established by decree of Ayatollah Khomeini, although the IRGC had already begun working informally several months prior in order to guard the country's new order.[45] On the revolutionary guards, Shirin stated, "They went to the streets and they had guns and suddenly they were the revolutionary guards. Who are the revolutionary guards to this day? You ask a Jew, a Muslim, or any Iranian. Who are the revolutionary guards? The riffraff, the people who have problems, those people." These guards were used to force the laws of the new regime on the Iranian population.

Moshe was six years old at the time of the Revolution. His parents did not participate in the demonstrations. He remembers the negative effect the Revolution had on him: changes could be felt in every aspect of daily life, which became more depressing and tense as insecurity and suspicion began to permeate. Muslim traditions were given constant visibility by any means necessary. David Menashri, for instance, states that the 1979 Revolution created an internal revolution

43 Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution*, p. 7.

44 Interview with Shirin, January 2014.

45 Ali Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards` Role in Iranian Politics," *Middle East Quarterly*, 15, 4 (2008), pp. 3-14.

within the Jewish community of Iran,[46] as every Iranian citizen was "newly educated", or more accurately, indoctrinated:[47] "After one hour of a children's TV program, they would all of a sudden have a prayer. In the middle of the children's program, there would be 15 minutes of prayer."[48]

Religious fanaticism had changed the nature of an entire nation almost overnight.[49] For example, Nastaran claimed that under the Shah, women's head covers were a sign of modesty and not necessarily religious practice, and that both Jewish and Muslim women of the older generation would cover their hair. She also recalled that in the 1930s, Reza Shah Pahlavi, the father of the last Shah, introduced his wife to the public without a head scarf, which changed the national dress code: "From that point on, if you came out [in public with a veil], the gendarmes in the street would rip it off because that was the Shah's command."[50] Ironically, the reverse happened with Khomeini's return to power in 1979. Women were once again obligated to cover themselves and abide by the authorities' rules of religious modesty, which were enforced by the revolutionary guards. In many ways, the Revolution of 1979 was a return to the 1930s.[51]

Shirin remembers her childhood as a struggle to adjust to the changes prompted by the Revolution. The entire population, including Muslims and members of other religions, had to obey and become accustomed to the new laws of the regime. Disobedience, Shirin recalls, was met with force:

> I remember we were on the way to the synagogue and it was a feast… So everybody wore black …but I did not. And they [the

46 David Menashri, "HaYehudim Tachat haMalucha haPahlavit vehaRepublica haIslamit," in: Chaim Saadon, *Iran*, Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, Jerusalem 2006, p. 63.

47 Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution*, p. 275.

48 Interview with Moshe, November 2013.

49 Jo-Anne Hart and Farhad Kazemi, "The Shi`i Praxis," in: Menashri (ed.), *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, p. 60.

50 Interview with Nastaran, July 2013.

51 Haleh Afshar (ed.), *Women and Politics in the Third World*, Routledge, New York 1996, p. 155.

> revolutionary guards] put color on my face to mark me. They said to me, "Are you not ashamed, not obeying the rules?" I was a little girl… and I cried "It's burning! It's burning!" It was itching. They used a green color and I was sure it was acid.[52]

Despite the pain and humiliation, Shirin felt lucky that nothing worse had happened to her. She also recalls the day she had to start wearing a head cover, as it is associated with her memory of other dramatic events. The incident occurred around the same time as the American Embassy takeover and the burning of local branches of American companies.[53] Shirin's family lived near the sites of these events and witnessed them first-hand, finally surmising it was time for the females in the family to cover their heads.

> My mother came to pick me up from school and said, "Put this on". …I knew I had no other choice. And I remember the street and the way everything looked. …And I remember that we went on the roof to see what was going on. And the people went to this company [General Electric] and just took washing machines, televisions, and anything else they could take.[54]

After this incident, people could only purchase American products illegally. As many in Iran had had a high standard of living and access to the latest fashions, which they wished to maintain after the Revolution, a vibrant black market was established in the country. Thus, an "underground life" developed parallel to life under government law that is rarely talked about. In Shirin's words: "You know, it's all underground and bribing… The police was very corrupt… if someone had money, they would be fine."[55] As most of the revolutionary guards came from a low socioeconomic status,[56] taking bribes became a significant source of income for them.[57] Corruption eventually ran rampant in Iran.

52 Interview with Shirin, January 2014.
53 Hart and Kazemi, "The Shi`i Praxis", p. 61.
54 Interview with Shirin, January 2014.
55 Ibid.
56 Afshar, *Women and Politics in the Third World*, p. 124.
57 Reza Afshari, *Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2001, p. 65.

Several attempts have been made to overthrow the Ayatollah's regime. However, the regime is very aware of such possibilities and responds with force to any attempt at a freer life, keeping Iranian citizens in a state of fear. The interviewees in the current study have observed subsequent events in Iran and connect these to their past experiences. Shirin, for instance, stated as follows:

> Look, they are waking up [the Iranian public]… But they [the regime] are very cruel, so they are afraid. …Compared to Syria, what's happening there is nothing, what is happening in prisons there. … Everything is done in the name of Islam. …Killing an innocent woman is not permitted, so they rape her one after the other and then there is reason to kill her. You know, everything is according to the law. …they hang people in the streets… even a 15-year-old.[58]

The revolutionary guards are given charge of the population and can harm citizens for random reasons, with minority groups being the most vulnerable. For instance, the word of a Muslim is always believed over that of a minority citizen, regardless of the truth.[59] Likewise, the word of a man is believed over that of a woman. In Iran, one's life can come under threat in an instant.

Contrary to its expansion under the Shah, after the Revolution Iran's Jewish community became tight-knit and isolated once again. This seemed necessary from a security perspective, and was also the result of Jews being identified as a minority by the government, which drove them out of general society.

Post-Revolution Education

Shaul was an eight-year-old child living in Isfahan at the time of the Revolution. Under the Shah he was able to attend an independent Jewish school, but things changed after the Revolution: "During the rule of the Shah, when I was about five or six years old, I went to a Jewish

58 Interview with Shirin, January 2014.

59 David Yeroushalmi, *The Jews of Iran in the Nineteenth Century*, Brill, Leiden/Boston 2010, p. 6 ff.

school. Later, when Khomeini came, I had to go to a Muslim school. The school principal was a Muslim."[60] Thus, the Iranian authorities were able to control the curriculum studied by Jewish children. The Muslim principal ensured that educational content at the school coincided with the regulations of the Islamic authority.[61] Coed schools no longer existed after the Revolution, and Shaul's was an all-boys school. Moshe shared that he and his family lived in a once-Jewish neighborhood that became mixed under the Shah's reign, as many Jews had moved outside of the community. Moshe recalls befriending mainly the Muslim children in his neighborhood: "I went to a Jewish school, but in my neighborhood there weren't many Jewish kids around."[62]

Shirin attended a public all-girls Jewish school.[63] Other than the Judaism teacher, the entire staff at the school was Muslim. Shirin describes the daily routine at her school, which was reflective of Iranian policy and included psychological inculcation from a very young age. Every child in Iran had to participate in a daily morning ceremony during which, among other announcements and recitations in support of Islam, they had to recite: "Death to America, death to Israel, Allah HuAkhbar." The ritual was meant to incite hatred toward these countries. Shirin described this routine in her interview, discussing the difficulties and dilemmas she faced as a child: "At home you hear 'Israel, Israel, Israel' and outside you are not allowed to talk."[64] At the time, Jewish children in Iran learned Jewish prayers and traditions at home, but were not allowed to discuss these subjects in public or at school. Thus, from a young age, they had to learn how to reconcile the hatred they were indoctrinated to feel with their own family history.

Whereas schools were closed on Shabbat prior to the Revolution, after 1979, the rules were changed and schools remained open on Saturdays. Disciplinary action against rebellious behavior would sometimes go

60 Interview with Shaul, November 2013.

61 Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, p. 76.

62 Interview with Moshe, November 2013.

63 Nesta Ramazani, "Women in Iran: The revolutionary Ebb and Flow," *Middle East Journal*, 47, 3 (1993), pp. 409-428, here p. 419.

64 Interview with Shirin, January 2014.

as far as involving government authorities. According to Shirin, the Muslim principal of her school would protect the Jewish students at times, whereas others could have responded differently and placed them in serious danger. At the time, a teacher could easily tell a lie in order to harm a pupil. Shirin explains:

> They had a lot of power… And they could have done more than complain about us, she [the principal] could have easily made one phone call, to say we were Zionists and they found Zionist materials in our bag. Even if they wouldn't have looked into our bags, they could have just said this and taken us to the car. And all the parents would have asked where we were.[65]

After the Revolution, Jewish schools had to instate a Muslim principal and follow a Muslim curriculum. The author of the current article was told that nowadays, Jewish schools in Iran have shut down completely and Jewish education is given in synagogues only.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the stories of Jews who lived in Iran before the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and left the country at some point following it. This microhistorical perspective allows a fascinating glimpse into life in Iran before and after the Revolution via testimonies from members of its Jewish minority.

The article first introduced interviewees' memories of life in Iran under the reign of the Shah, during the so-called "golden age" of Iranian Jews. The increased sense of security and access to professional opportunities among women and minorities at that time eventually led to the dispersion of the Jewish community. Life in areas outside of closed Jewish communities provided Jewish individuals with more opportunities to succeed and acquire new professions.

However, while the changes made under the Shah's regime were seen as progress, they did not completely eradicate the gaps between Jews and the majority population.

65 Ibid.

As indicated by the interviews, under the Shah some Iranian Jews made significant efforts to be part of general Iranian society. However, it is also evident that some of them did not take the "golden age" in Iran for granted, as they constantly sought to gain knowledge and awareness regarding the undercurrents that drove Iranian society. The Iranian Jewish community of the time was characterized by a general striving for secularity and worldliness. This can be seen as a tactic for ensuring security, as freedom and security are to some degree synonymous. Iranian Jews were in great need of security, which they were finally able to gain under the Shah. Often, a secure lifestyle is associated with stability and constancy, and for Iranian Jews, such constancy in daily life was absent before the Shah's reign. However, as confirmed by the interviews, Iranian Jews were also able to establish internal security through long-term traditions, a structure that was taken for granted by some members of the community.

The liberal groups in Iran were among those who initiated the upheavals against the Shah, but while they wished to replace him as a leader, they did not want to relinquish the advancements he had introduced to Iranian society. Nonetheless, the upheavals resulted in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is ruled by religious leaders and abides by Islamic law.

The Revolution dramatically changed the life of every Iranian citizen. It posed a threat to those who did not align with the values of the new religious authorities in general and to non-Muslim minorities in particular, as expressed by the interviewees.

In the field of education, the Revolution resulted in the eradication of historically independent Jewish schools by placing them under the supervision of Islamic representatives. In this case, reforms made under the Shah actually supported the Islamic Republic that rose to power following the Revolution; the establishment of governmental schools by the Shah's regime made it easier for religious authorities to revise their educational standards in compliance with Islamic values. Anti-Semitic sentiments, even if subliminal, were always present, as corroborated by Nastaran's family history. These age-old sentiments were also useful to

Muslim fundamentalists in achieving the goals of the Revolution.[66]

This article has provided insight into the personal implications of the Revolution for members of the Jewish minority in Iran. These individuals had to suddenly abide by a religion other than their own, and were forced to follow edicts that affected and changed their personal lifestyle. The Iranian population was suddenly told how to dress, directed as to when and how to pray, and exposed to the propaganda of a group that began to reign with force. This state of affairs must have been traumatic for many, and induced fear about what the future would hold. Such sentiments were expressed by both Dasi and Shaul, who stated that adults were afraid for their children and tried to protect them, while the children themselves did not understand what was happening around them but were clearly aware of the life-threatening changes that had transpired.

After the Revolution, Iranian Jews were embroiled in a dichotomous existence, forced to conceal aspects of their heritage and to reconcile indoctrinated hatred toward the State of Israel with their own family history.

66 Amanat and Vejdani, *Iran Facing Others*, p. 228.

Appendix

Group Profile Interviewees

Name	Female/Male	Age in 1979	Last Location in Iran	Originally from	Year of Emigration	Education/ Occupation	Economic Situation	Siblings	Children
Meir Dasi	Male Female	27 21	Tehran	Isfahan	1989	University Administration	Middle	5 5	3
Rahel	Female	27	Tehran		1989	Administration	Middle	5	1
Nastaran	Female	23	Tehran		1982	University	High	2	2
Yossi	Male	12	Tehran	Tehran	1979	Food Industry	High	2	3
Shaul	Male	8	Isfahan	Isfahan	2002	Merchant	Low	5	None
Moshe	Male	6	Tehran	Isfahan	1987	University	High	1	None
Shirin	Female	6	Tehran	Kashan/ Isfahan	1988	Social Assistance	Middle	2	3