

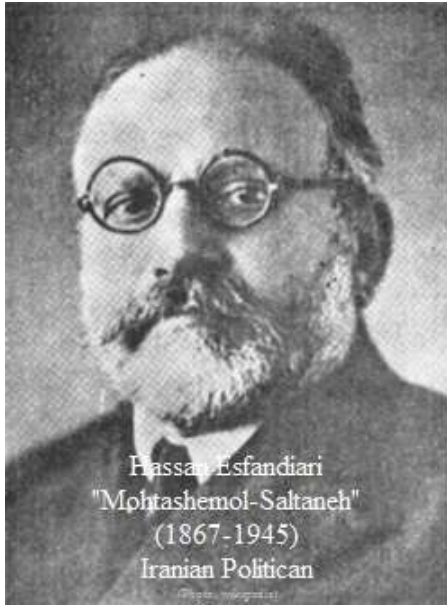
# Reza Shah & Negotiations with Hitler

## Over the Jews of Iran

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لطفاً نسخه فارسی این نوشتار را پیشتر در صفحه نخست این فایل ملاحظه فرمایید.



Hassan Esfandiari  
"Mohtashemol-Saltaneh"  
(1867-1945)  
Iranian Politician

Hassan Esfandiari (1867-1945) also known by his royal title as Mohtasham ol-Saltaneh, then Speaker of the Iranian National Parliament, to meet with Hitler. Reza Shah's wife and two daughters, Princesses Ashraf and Shams, also met with Hitler on this

A most interesting episode in the contemporary Jewish life of the diaspora involved the disagreement between Reza Shah Pahlavi and Adolf Hitler over the subject of the Jews of Iran. The wretched Hitler, thinking foolishly that he would conquer Iran, brought up the matter of Jews with Reza Shah. The Iranian King, may he rest in peace, responded that, "the Jews of Iran are Jewish Iranians. In our country, we are all Iranians, even though we may each follow a different faith or religion." To resolve the conflict, and unsure if Hitler had been convinced, he sent Mr. Hassan

trip. Upon their visit, they presented Hitler with two fine hand-crafted rugs from Tabriz, one depicting a photo of Hitler and the other a Nazi Swastika, as well as some fine pistachio from Rafsanjan. Hitler told the Iranian Queen that he was happy Reza Shah was a military figure. He also said, “We aren’t as rich to reciprocate your gifts,” and he merely autographed photos of his and handed them to the Iranian emissaries. During the said meeting, Mr. Esfandiari succeeded in convincing Hitler, and as such, Reza Shah would not be tarnished by possibly harming Jews in the case of a German victory. Within few years, Hitler finally shot himself with a bullet into the mouth, and took his dream of conquering Iran to the grave.



Hassan Esfandiari (2nd left) with Mussa Nuri Esfandiari (left)  
Meeting With Adolf Hitler

Hassan Esfandiari (2<sup>nd</sup> left) with Mussa Esfandiari (left)  
Meeting with Adolf Hitler

It’s shocking to learn how the big governments negotiate over their subjects without them knowing. That’s akin to shepherds bargaining with a butcher to decide the fate of the unwitting sheep. If Reza Shah and his government had not refused Hitler’s ominous wish, as they did wisely and bravely, the Jews of Iran might have faced an undesirable fate. It seems fitting to contrast Reza Shah’s

position and approach to protect the Jews of Iran versus the open hostility of Amin al-Husseini, the Palestinian Mufti of Jerusalem at the time, who during his several meetings with Hitler, encouraged him the more to massacre the Jewish people.



Amin al-Husseini, Palestinian Mufti,  
in a Meeting With Adolf Hitler

In those days, as a result of German propaganda via the Persian Voice of Berlin, some ignorant and bigoted Iranians had come to accept that Hitler was a Muslim! This belief, together with their intrinsic hostility towards Jews, had made them look forward to the arrival of “the Führer” in Iran, a dream which fortunately they would take with them to the grave. Some of them were youngsters who hoped to gain rank and wealth once their wish came to pass, so far as they greeted each other in the Nazi fashion on the streets of Tehran! They went so far as to creating a new party after WWII and during the reign of Muhammad Reza Shah, known as Sumka, which supported Nazism.

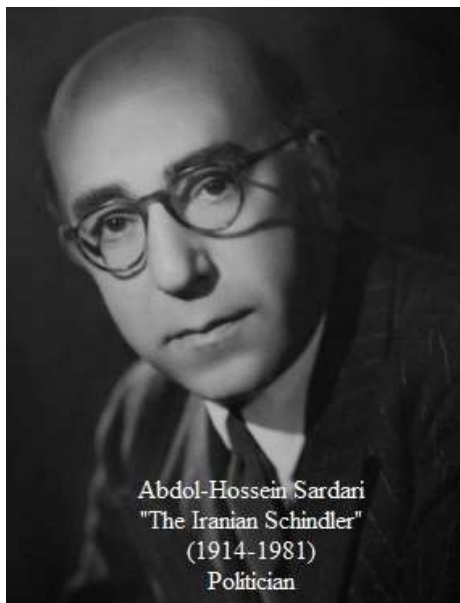
I remember vividly the Berlin radio propaganda broadcasts. The wretched announcer named Shahrokh promoted anti-Semitism with considerable zeal. The way he spoke was utterly interesting, and a bunch of fools simply took in his

words. To this date, German products mean something special to such people! Did Shahrokh indeed believe in what he said? One moonless night, as the story goes, a thief broke into a house, only to find nothing but a tonbak or Persian drum on the shelf next to where a couple were sleeping. He figured that the wife must be a dancer, and the couple performed together to earn a living. He woke them up and ordered the wife to dance for him as her husband played the drum. The woman started to dance hesitantly, but once she had warmed up, she pulled on her skirt and flashed some shins. An hour later, the thief thanked them both for the performance, gave them a coin, and left the house. Once the thief was gone, the husband began to beat up his wife. The poor woman pleaded in tears, “Why are you hitting me? What wrong have I done?!” The man said, “You had no choice but to dance; but showing off your pretty legs, that was from mischief!” Likewise, I think, although the confounded Shahrokh was doing his job to present the news and propaganda, his evident fervor in poisoning the air against Jews rose from his own wicked essence. He didn’t need to do it the way he did.

Reza Shah’s long list of services to his country over the mere span of 16 years is truly admirable. It seems that the Iranian king was fascinated by the German technology, but he had no Nazi inclinations. Thence, he had the Germans build the national railroad of Iran, as well as a number of major structures, such as the National Bank, besides other industrial projects. Incidentally, it’s said that at the opening of the Veresk Bridge toward Mazandarn, the king had ordered the foreign engineer to stand its underneath to make sure of its safety and reliability. Reza Shah did approve of this aspect of the Germans. Sadly, however, the Allied leaders believed mostly that he was a Nazi, and thus, they had him abdicate the throne and leave the country into exile, where he would pass away at the age of 66. It’s

noteworthy that the later generations of the same Allies would also take away his son, Muhammad Reza Shah, from the country, at almost 60 years of age.

May I point out that as he left Iran, Muhammad Reza Shah did not touch either the Crown Jewels Treasury or the National Bank reserves. However, he did take with him the joy, laughter, happiness, and relative freedom, which among others, had thereto let women choose how to dress themselves. Not surprisingly, 45 years on, the Iranians are crying in pain, “We did it to ourselves!”



Abdol-Hossein Sardari  
“The Iranian Schindler”  
(1914-1981)  
Politician

It should be noted that about the time Mr. Esfandiari was making his move, Mr. Abdol-Hossein Sardari (1914-1981) the head of the Iranian consulate in Paris, and maternal uncle to the late Amir-Abbas Hoveyda, saved thousands of Iranian and Non-Iranian Jewish lives by issuing visas and passports to them, and by convincing the Germans that the Jews of Iran were merely “Mousavi” i.e. the followers of Moses. Among those saved as such was an Iranian-born lady, who

at the time lived in France. She now lives in Los Angeles, happily and in good health, where she enjoys the company of her many grandchildren and

great-grandchildren. A good friend of mine, although unable to read Persian, she is fluent in both French and English. I am also happy to report that today, that righteous man, the late Sardari has been commemorated by a permanent plaque at the Yad va-Shem museum of Israel.

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Indeed, Jewish life during the long period of the diaspora worldwide has been subjected to a host of factors, including that they were used constantly for bargaining chips in small and large political deals! Altogether, such countless internal and external factors have led to some incredible differences and variations amongst this people. The emergence of diverse traditions and dialects among Jews has been to the point that in certain ways, for instance, it's hard to believe the European and the Yemeni Jews belong to the same faith. Even the Eastern and Western European Jews are so different that one can hardly compare them. Over time, the latter two communities have divided into two major groups known as the Ashkenazi and the Sephardic Jews — and following WWII, and as a result of the widespread promotion of the Eastern European ghetto cultures, into further more religious and secular groups.

The Hebrew word *Sepharad* means Spain. Alas, in 1492 the Jews of Spain a.k.a. the Sephardim were expelled from the country along with the Muslims, and thus, they were forced to wander about and suffer immeasurable hardship. At the time, the Ottoman Turkey was the only country that welcomed these people. (In recent years, about 500 years later, the King and Queen of Spain paid a visit to a major Sephardic Temple of Los Angeles, expressed remorse at the expulsion of Jews, but also announced officially that the Sephardic Jews had been practically granted honorary Spanish citizenship.) At the time of that vast persecution and exile, the Silk Road, extending from China to the ports of Venice in Italy, had become something of a mobile exhibit for Chinese products. As that historic road passed by the Iranian city of Kashan, a small number of the Sephardic Jews found their way to this city, while a fewer number of them came to Isfahan. Remnants of that history can still be found in the Jewish dialects of the two cities. For instance, the Jews of Isfahan refer to “watermelon” and “house” as *sandi* and *kazeh*,

respectively, similar to the Spanish *sandía* and *casa*. Also some Kashani Jews used to name their kids *senor*, which is the same as the Spanish *señor*! Although no detailed evidence has reached us, it seems these people were traveling the Silk Road for business, when they stayed and settled in Kashan. Today, scholars confirm that some Kashani Jews have descended from the surviving Jews of Spain. According to the late Chacham Yedidia Shofet, his and the Aryeh family, who are related, belonged to the 13<sup>th</sup> generation of the Spanish Jews in Iran. The two families also had a beautiful family tree that traced their lineage, which was left behind in Iran.

Based on my personal observations and studies, I can say that the diversity of the Jewish communities across the diaspora has resulted in a vast and colorful mosaic, about which we can write volumes more and continue to learn abundantly. For instance, as a result of the Jewish and Chinese cooperation via the Silk Road, the Chinese whether directly, or indirectly through the Jewish people, taught the production of Silk to the Iranians. Also the rug production industry, whether it was passed down from the Chinese to the Iranians or vice versa, was another result of such exchanges; although aspects of this subject reach back to around 2000 years ago. As for the history of silk, however, we can be more confident that it was the Iranians who learned this art and craft from the Chinese via the Jews, for in my childhood, the preparation of silk thread into yarns following the production was done only in Kashan, and only by the Jewish women of the city. Whereas all Jewish women worked to bring in an extra income, this group had made some quite basic devices from straw, wood and the like, which helped them work up the silk. The occupation of my father, Chacham Yedidia's father, and tens of others like them in Kashan consisted of this very production and preparation of the silk thread for the weaving of velvet and silk rugs. Personally, I remember that 85 years

ago, I would go after school to several places, where I fetched the yarns of silk from housewives — who were breastfeeding with one hand and spinning the wheels with the other — and brought the yarns to my father’s store.

Whenever I traveled, I used to make sure to attend the local synagogue, so far as possible, and spend the Shabbat with the local folks. I admit this wasn’t meant solely for the worship: at the synagogue, I could learn a lot about the life of the people in that region, and more. (As the story goes, one day President Clinton asked his team how it was that Mossad always got the fresh intelligence before the CIA did. The Agency chief proposed that it must have something to do with the synagogues. To test the theory, the two gentlemen secretly attended a temple for the Shabbat services. The President, heavily disguised, asked the old man sitting next to him, “What’s up, my friend?” The man whispered, “I’m not sure, but the word is Mr. Clinton is gonna be here today!”) Thus, on my visits to different cities and countries, such as Mexico, Venezuela, Panama, Hong Kong, Barcelona in Spain, Paris of 1955, and others, no matter what, I did try my best to attend a synagogue; and I have some fond memories of those visits. Taking these examples into account, one can state without exaggeration that through the centuries and millennia, Jewish communities have had a presence in more than 1000 places around the world, many of whom, however, have sadly moved from those places or disappeared. The late great historian Professor Amnon Netzer said that in Iran alone there had been 50 cities with major Jewish populations, so far as Alliance Israélite Universelle opened branches in a considerable number of Iranian cities. Taking a closer look, you would notice that such Jews had often settled in inclement areas, such as laid out towns and cities beyond the mountains, accessible mostly through old and treacherous roads, such as Damavand, Nahavand, and tens



of other similar Iranian towns and cities. The oldest extant evidence of Jewish presence in Iran goes back to more than 2000 years ago and the city of Shush, near the shrine of Prophet Daniel, and close to today's city of Ahvaz in the Khouzestan province of Iran.

In 1982, I traveled together with my beloved wife, the late Mahboubeh Khanom, to the Far East. During that trip, we also visited the country of Taiwan, where we stayed at a hotel in Taipei that belonged to the First Lady of this Chinese Island. It was a most interesting and beautiful place. Our stay coincided with Yom Kippur, and to honor the Jewish holiday and observe the fasting, we set out to find a synagogue. On Yom Kippur, together with my wife, we got an address from the hotel staff, and left for the synagogue. To our surprise, there were about 150 people in the temple, mostly men, for they were all there on business. The majority of the congregation belonged to those from Israel. Few minutes later, the rabbi of the synagogue, an old British man, and his young Chinese wife, entered the synagogue. The rabbi asked everyone to introduce themselves and tell us where they were from. I said I was from Iran. The man next to me said he was from Yemen. Suddenly, the rabbi got excited and said, "Wow! How wonderful! During the war, I served as a British soldier in her Majesty's army, which took me to Yemen. While there, I attended a local synagogue, where to my surprise, some congregants were holding their *sidurs* or their *Torahs* upside down or sideways, and were reading them just like that. In disbelief, I took a second look, but I hadn't been wrong. A gentleman was indeed reading his *sidur* i.e. the prayer book upside down, and comfortably so! I laughed and asked, 'What's this all about?' The rabbi of the temple said, 'In the past, we didn't have enough copies of the *Torah* and *sidur* for everyone. The teacher would sit before a small desk, open his copy of the book before him, and teach the kids that way. Meanwhile, the students sat all

around the desk, and learned to read from which side they were sitting: upside down or sideways. So these guys have got used to reading books the way they do.””

This interesting story, as well as many other examples of the differences and sharp contrasts between the customs and traditions of various Jewish communities, altogether tell us that what has overshadowed and frustrated such differences, what has united this people and has preserved them through the ages, it has been but the *Torah*. Otherwise, there would have remained no sign of Judaism. It's no trifle that this people have been scattered more or less in thousands of villages, towns and cities around the world for about 2000 years, and yet they feel so close and united.

The diversity of the Iranian Jewish communities in itself had formed a considerable part of the colorful global Jewish mosaic. Following the rise of Reza Shah to power in Iran, Tehran became gradually the official and practical center of the country, and consequently, from about 1940, little by little, the majority of Jews from the smaller towns and cities immigrated to Tehran. Before long, with the migration of the major part of Jewish population from such cities as Kashan, Hamedan, Isfahan, Yazd, Shiraz etc., which thereto were known for their sizeable Jewish community, Tehran would take in the majority of the Jews of Iran.

Those from Tehran used to tease the others from the smaller towns. They could laugh and joke, though half-seriously, “When the Jews from Isfahan arrive in Tehran, they first ask where they could set up their peddling booths?! The Hamedanis, holding an empty bottle, look for the medicine market, and find their way straight to the Nasser Khosrow area! Those from Kashan wrap a mud brick inside a silk scarf to show for their office, hold it under their armpit, and ask for the Amir Chamber of the bazaar! But the Yazdis, they ask for the synagogue,” because the caretakers of Jewish temples were all from Yazd! And so forth.

Of course, those from Tehran, which was more of a center and afforded more freedoms, tended to have more contact with the non-Jewish people. Indeed, many dishes which Jews prepare today were originally from Tehran, even as the Tehranis had learned the recipes in turn from the others.

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The story of the Jews of Iran, especially in the era of Reza Shah, is intertwined with the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools and the invaluable services of this organization towards not only the Jewish people, but also everyone else in the country. The earliest steps to establish these schools in Iran had been taken years before the reign of Reza Shah, that is, since the time of Nasseraddin Shah; but it was during the years when Reza Shah was approaching power that a significant number of these schools opened in various cities. Ever since, undoubtedly a large number of Jews and Muslims remain indebted to the Alliance.

To be more precise, it took about 25 years, from 1867, when the heads of the Alliance in France received permission from Nasseraddin Shah, the Qajar king, until the first of such schools was established in Iran. After 1867, at first two envoys of the Alliance traveled from France to Iran on carts and wagons — of course, back then there were no automobiles! — making their journey through the dangerous roads of the time, in order to pave the grounds for the schools. Finally, in 1898, they opened the first school in Tehran. Two years later, in 1900, the Alliance of Hamedan was inaugurated, followed by those in Isfahan and other towns and cities. Thus, as Ms. Homa Nategh states in her book *Farhang-e Farangi* i.e. *The Foreign Culture*, Alliance Israélite gradually opened its branches in several Iranian cities, and welcomed Jews and non-Jews equally. Notably, as we can see today, this very organization laid the foundation of the advancement of the second, third and fourth generations of the Jews of Iran ever since.

In my opinion, the best generation of the Iranian Jews and some of the Muslims, consisted of those who rose with the rise of the Pahlavi Dynasty, and could leave the country with their sunset. To put it another way, the best generation in the history of Iran stepped upon the world stage in that period between the dawn of the Pahlavis until they stepped down from power. May the Kings of Pahlavi rest in peace, for they greatly served the Iranians, and especially the Iranian Jews, or the Jewish Iranians.

Alas, as greatly as the organization served the people, the Iranian papers did not for once acknowledge the Alliance Israélite. Whereas, according to documents, at some point 670 students were studying at the Alliance of Hamedan alone, only 150 of whom were Jewish, while the remainder comprised Muslims and members of other religious and social groups. In my own hometown of Kashan, the first people to register were the children of the military families and other influential Muslim figures. There too the Alliance never discriminated between Jews and others, as it welcomed everyone. To underscore the point, it should suffice to cite three prominent examples of the achievements of this organization statewide. Simply consider that the Minister of Education of Reza Shah's government, as well as Mr. Hossein Alā, a Prime Minister, and Dr. Jahanshah Saleh, the Minister of Health, both cabinet members of Muhammad Reza Shah, they all stated to have been students of the Alliance. (I have commemorated Dr. Saleh on page 402 of my book, and elsewhere in my articles, with a photo of him and excerpts of his words.)

As the poet said,

The wind and the clouds, the sun and the moon, the celestial wheel,  
They're all at work so you'd earn a living to enjoy and appreciate.

Thank you.

Wishing you the best,

Norman “Nourollah” Gabay

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For free copies of this and other writings by Norman “Nourollah” Gabay, please visit his website at [www.BabaNouri.com](http://www.BabaNouri.com) . The website is home to an archive of the author’s articles, essays, notes, and books in Persian and English, including *An Invitation to Reason*, *A Dictionary of the Kashani Jewish Dialect*, and soon, *Be Up to Date* (in progress).