

Persia

The Persian community is one of the oldest in the Diaspora. It dates back to the Babylonian exile in the fourth century BCE. For two centuries, the Jews in exile in Mesopotamia and in the homeland in Palestine were under Persian rule; and the Persian community was attached to the Babylonian, and depended on the early Babylonian yeshivot. Its culture today is similar in its everyday Jewish practice to that of the Jews of Iraq. Their cooking too is similar.

The Jews of Persia were known for their wealth in ancient and medieval times. As merchants, they were part of the network that connected the West with China in the silk trade and with India in the spice trade. They were prosperous and relatively well integrated through the Sassanian period, in the third century CE and the Muslim Arab period. Their position deteriorated with the Shiite Safavid regime, whose rigid way of interpreting the Koran excluded and marginalized them. There was a revival of Jewish life during the Sunni Mogul Empire, which was liberal towards minorities. But when the Moguls moved to India and the Shias returned to power at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Jews were again oppressed and marginalized. The shahs did not allow them at court or in any position of power and influence. Shah Abbas was an exception and allowed them to settle in his capital, Isfahan, but they were expelled in 1656 and forced to convert to Islam. Many emigrated to Iraq, Syria, Bukhara, Samarkand, Baku and Georgia. A very small community was left in Persia in the eighteenth century - and they lived miserable, humble lives, quietly and afraid.

In a chapter entitled 'Parsi, Jewish & Armenian Women' from a 1930s book, the writer says:

In most large cities there is a Jewish quarter, which, bad as a Moslem city can sometimes be, is even worse. Jewish women are not veiled but they adopt the black outdoor chador worn by all Persian townswomen and keep their faces well covered. In their own houses they wear long full skirts with a jumper-like upper garment and a jacket, a muslin scarf is pinned under the chin. They speak Persian and English and French, which are looked upon as languages of advancement. Many are educated in French and English schools.

The girls are betrothed when they are eight or nine but not married until they are about sixteen. They have Biblical, Hebrew and also Persian names. (Kafi means 'enough' and is given when a boy would have been a much more welcome arrival than a girl. The name is often given and one is sorry for the bearer of the name.)

He writes that many Jewish women do embroidery and visit many shrines that are place pilgrimage, like Queen Esther's burial place, near Isfahan. He adds that, though Persians have never persecuted the Jews, they treat them with the utmost contempt.

In the nineteenth century, the entire Jewish community of Meshed was forced to come to Islam but continued to practice Judaism in secret. Some managed to escape to Afghanistan where they returned to Judaism at the end of the century. A large number went together a hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca as Muslims, then on to Medina and to holy Muslim sites Jerusalem. There they stayed, returning to Judaism, and they built a special quarter for themselves with a beautiful synagogue.

With the accession of the Pahlavi dynasty (the late shah's father) in 1925, the position of the Jews in Iran improved enormously. The transformation was so great that most left the hinterland for Teheran: Some, who were close to Riza Shah and his son Muhammad Riza, lived very grandly. But many of the poor and middle classes went to Israel in 1948 in an operation called 'Magic Carpet'. The wealthy are now mostly in Los Angeles.

The foreword to a little book entitled *Persian (Jewish) Cook Book*, compiled by the Sisterhood of the Persian Congregation, Skokie, Illinois, begins: 'The recipes listed in this

book have been lovingly prepared for many years in much the same way as they were generations ago in the Urmia and Eravon areas of Persia. In the second decade of the twentieth century began the migration to the city of Chicago.' It continues, 'Our people possessed the talent of making little food go a long way, therefore this book has numerous recipes for soups.' Their food is poor food compared with the jewelled rice and other grand dishes adopted by the wealthy community in the time of the shah.

From: Claudia Roden: The Book of Jewish Food. An Odyssey from Samarkand and Vilna to the Present Day.