

A BRIEF HISTORY OF NEW JULFA ISPHAHAN IRAN

In 16-th century Armenia was under Ottoman-Turkish occupation. Armenians were living under extreme pressure and greedy and savage vassals had made the life of the Armenians miserable.

In (the neighboring) Iran, as soon as Shah Abbas became the king decided to attack the Turks, revenge for all the mischiefs that they had caused to Iran and to snatch Armenia from them.

Shah Abbas was very well aware of the Armenian history, Armenian culture and their abilities and talents.

For a long time he had a plan in his mind to immigrate Armenians to Iran, to improve the art, culture, agriculture and the trade of the country.

He was also thinking of giving Armenians exceptional advantages and freedom.

In 1603 Shah Abbas at the head of a huge army moved towards north.

First he invaded Azerbaidjan then continued his attack towards Armenia and reached Araratian to Kars regions.

The newly crowned sultan of Turkey, Sultan Ahmed I hearing the news of Persian invasion, formed an even bigger army and started the counter attack.

The Turkish army was under the generalissimo of Jelal Zadeh Sina Pasha.

Shah Abbas realizing that he cannot resist the Turkish army decided to recede but to damage Turkey decided to leave Armenia in ruins.

During his campaign, when Shah Abbas arrived in Julfa, the Armenians welcomed him with great procession.

The king lodged in the palace of prince Khatchik. For the occasion the palace was decorated with royal dignity.

To show the respect of the Armenian people the Armenian prince presented the king a tray full of gold by the hand of his son.

Shah being impressed by the richness of the Armenians in Julfa became more firm in his plan.

Armenians tried to convince the king to cancel his plan of immigrating the people to Iran but was of no use.

Almost all Armenians from Kars onward to Arax river were driven towards Iran.

Those who resisted were tortured and even killed.

From one side there was the fear of Turkish soldiers who were advancing very fast and on the other side was the brutal treatment of Iranian soldiers.

Under those awful conditions thousands of Armenian immigrants reached Arax river.

There wasn't sufficient boats , order was given that many immigrants cross the river by swimming . Many who couldn't swim were drown. The river was covered with so many dead bodies that some could pass over them , according to an eyewitness tale .

More than 25,000 families were driven to Isfahan the capital. By the Shah's order some families were also settled in other good regions of the country .

In 1605 by special arrangements of the king , Armenians founded New Julfa near Isphahan. A scenic river is flowing between Isphahan and Julfa. At the south of Julfa there is a high mountain with pointed pick which resembles to mount Ararat. At the outskirts of the mountain Armenian cemetery was created. Some grave stones have very interesting inscription and design.

Presently an Armenian council is governing the cemetery and due to its historical value extra care is taken.

Shah Abbas soon realized that since Armenians were brought to Iran forcefully may gradually return to their homeland unless they are tied firmly to Iran.

He bestowed them complete religious and political freedom.

To show his respect and love towards the Armenians he was attending Armenian festivals ,participating in their dinners, even drinking wine and eating pork in private Armenian gatherings. Occasionally he was even attending the church ceremonies.

In the event of a dispute between an Armenian and an Iranian the judge was usually giving the right to the Armenian.

To break their ties with the mainland specially with Edjmiatsin he transferred The Hand Of Illuminator and many other sacred treasures to his capital . But later , his successor returned them to Edjmiatsin where they are safely kept up to the present time .

Shah Abbas was also thinking of constructing a new Edjmiatsin in New Julfa or other location in Isphahan , by actually bringing the holy stones and many items from Edjmiatsin . But luckily that plan did not take place and Edjmiatsin was not demolished.

However 15 pieces of stones including the famous stone on which Jesus had descended according to a tradition , the Saint Table and the Baptism Basin were brought to New Julfa.

The transportation was done very carefully , most items were wrapped in leathers .

The above mentioned items were taken to Saint Gregory Church of Julfa , they are there up to the present time , and are greatly respected and venerated by Armenians.

After a while when Armenians were convinced that there is no return to the homeland and they are treated well in Iran , started to think about their future , improvement of their new home New Julfa , how to help their homeland and how to preserve their religion and national heritage.

Hence the first known Armenian Diaspora was established.

It was like a miracle , after only two decades New Julfa became an important center not only for the Armenians but also for Iran .

Outside the mainland New Julfa became the most important center of the Armenian religion and culture.

17 churches were constructed , one in each section of the town . 12 of them still exist and are in operation .

To preserve the Armenian language and culture Armenian schools were also established .

The cathedral of " All Savers " with it's museum is a glory for all Armenians .

Among Near Eastern nations , the Armenians in New Julfa were the first to introduce printing press and paper mill . In 1638 by the efforts of Vartabet Khachatoor Kesaratsi the first Armenian book was printed .

The original printing machine and the letters are kept in the museum .

The Khojas (The Riches) of Julfa have performed immense role in economic and cultural domain of Iran .

Later when they reached to higher ranks they spread their activities abroad _ Russia , India , Java and other countries.

The Khojas established big trade companies , had their own ships some even with armed guards to protect from the pirates .

From Julfa many merchants and artisans were going to Astrakhan and Moscow . Above all Shah was appointing many Armenian ambassadors .

In 1660 Armenians from Julfa presented the Tzar a very valuable gift . A royal throne decorated with 100 diamonds and 100 other precious stones . 28 pounds of gold and 8 pounds of silver was used to make this throne , which was being used during crowning ceremonies of the Russian Tzars .

This throne is presently in the museum of Kremlin , is considered as one of the precious articles of the museum and is admired by many visitors .

An Armenian Khoja , presented empress Catherine a diamond in the size of an egg . The value of this gift was *estimated that time 100 mil. fr* (undeterminable). In return the empress rewarded him with 500,000 roubles and also the title of noblesse . The empress placed that diamond on the top of her mace .

Wealthy Lazarians went to Moscow and founded the famous Lazarian Tchamaran_ college . For many generations , Tchamaran has been a famous educational institute from which many famous Armenian intellectuals , scholars and national activists have graduated .

In international politics and in the life of our struggle for freedom , Armenians of New Julfa have brought their

important contributions .

Famous freedom activists like Israel Ori , Emin Shahmirian and many ambassadors who have served in Russia , India , England and other countries were Armenians of New Julfa .

In 1918 Dianna Apcar , from New Julfa's famous Abcarian family was appointed as the ambassador of The Republic Of Armenia to Japan . Dianna Apcar is considered as the first known " Woman Ambassador " .

C H U R C H E S

In the past Armenians had 17-20 churches in New Julfa . Some did not receive very appropriate attention because were located in inconvenient areas . Also for many reasons the number of Armenian families were declining . Therefore some churches were gradually ruined . At the present time 12 churches are still in existence and operational .

Among the existing churches Saint Bethlehem is considered as the biggest and the most important with its architectural design , construction , paintings and decoration .

The church was constructed in 1628 by generous contributions of Khoja Petros Velijan and by Armenian architects . The church is almost square in design , has unusual tall walls and twin domes . The main dome has 8 windows opening inside the church . Between each window there are paintings and nice decorations .

The height from the surface to the top of the dome is twenty six meters , perhaps the highest among any Armenian Church . The paintings are taken from stories of Old and New Testaments , also from the life of Grigor The Illuminator and other saints .

Only 150 meters away from Saint Bethlehem there is another church : Saint Mary which is famous for its splendor and specially for its wall paintings .

Why there are two churches almost side by side ?

According to legends during the week of Passover when Khoja Petros wanted to attend Saint Mary's church , and was not able to find a place to stand , decided to construct another and bigger church .

"Soorp Amenaprkchian Vank " _ Saint All Savers Cathedral was constructed in 1655 , which from the very first day became the center of Irano-Indian Diocese . Vank is also the center for the Diocesan Council .

The Matenadaran , the printing house and above all the museum are located within the Cathedral complex .

The Cathedral is famous for its paintings executed by expert painters , and for its unique faience decoration .

The Cathedral and specially its museum with numerous valuable and historical items is considered as one of the most important tourist attractions of Isphahan and Iran .

Thousands of tourists visit The Cathedral every year . Many kings , queens , presidents , government representatives , scientists and official guests have visited The Cathedral ,

have signed the memorial book and have expressed their admirations.

Matenadaran is famous for its manuscript books , 700 volume in number , thirty seven volumes are in parchment . The oldest one is a Testament written in 10-th century and has 212 pages .

Some manuscripts are illuminated with gold and color illustrations and have very nice writings .

148 manuscripts were written in New Julfa and the others in Armenia , Constantinople , India , Basra , Shiraz , etc. for the number and quality of the manuscripts the Julfa Matenadaran takes the 5-th place among all Armenian Matenadaran of the world .

The collection of old printed books is also very valuable . Among them there are two books printed in 1513 in Venice , the first and the second printed books in New Julfa , and the first printed Armenian journals in Madras _ " Azdarar " by Rev. Harootune Shmavonian .

In the museum there are all kinds of Armenian artifacts . Textiles , religious objects , vestments for priests embroidered with gold thread and Armenian inscriptions , episcopal crowns , maces , silver chalices , cups , plates , statues etc.

The museum has also a modest collection of Armenian and Iranian coins .

Saint Mary's statue _ baby Jesus in her bosom _ made from one piece wood and another wooden statue of Christ with thorn crown are some of the valuable artworks of the museum .

There are also some nice paintings . La Pieta by an Italian artist named Annibal Karadzi , presents the entombment of Jesus . Its a very nice painting and the body of dead Christ painted in white and yellow seems so natural .

In a special room there are Firmans (Proclamations) of kings and high ranking government officials given to Armenians of New Julfa . These 23 Firmans have important historical value . They are issued by Shah Abbas and 14 other kings of 5 different successive dynasties .

They have all praised the Armenians and order is given to local leaders of Isphahan to protect the rights of Armenians in Julfa .

POLITICS AND SOCIAL LIFE *****

In general the Persian people as well as the kings and other government leaders of Iran starting from Shah Abbas up to the present government of the Islamic Republic have respected the Armenians and have treated them nicely .

But the Armenians of Julfa did have unpleasant days as well. During the last period of Safavi dynasty , the Afghans

invaded Iran . The Iranian population in general and the Armenians in particular suffered a lot . When they occupied the capital Isphahan and learned about the richness of Julfa, attacked on and looted many Armenian churches and homes .

At other times whenever the central government was becoming weaker due to power struggles , the mountainous Lorestan tribes taking advantage of the situation were attacking on Julfa , robbing the houses and looting the churches . most of the time even imposing taxes on people .

Unfortunately the Armenian population of New Julfa was declining gradually . The big exodus to Armenia by tens of thousands happened in 1946. In the beginning of this century many Armenians , especially young males went to countries like India , Indonesia and Singapore for education . Some returned , and others stayed there or migrated to Europe . Later many families moved to southern oil rich area of Khusistan , especially when Anglo_Iranian oil company was established . At the beginning most of the Iranian employees of the Oil Company , especially in management and technical fields were Armenians .

Later , many Armenian families of New Julfa migrated to Teheran , where more employment opportunities were offered .

After the recent revolution of Iran , even more families left Julfa and Iran , and found new homes all over the world _England , Australia , France , especially U.S.A. etc. But unfortunately very few families migrated to Armenia after the recent revolution .

Another unfortunate fact is that the Armenian houses are sold to Persians and New Julfa is not a pure Armenian town any more .

On the other hand its very fortunate that many devoted Armenians still live in New Julfa , and do every thing possible to preserve and maintain our churches , schools , Vank , the museum and the Armenian life .

As mentioned earlier , New Julfa is the center of southern Iran and Irano_India prelacy . The prelate of the Armenian church too has very important role in leading the Armenian community . Both prelacies of Iran are under the Cilician Seat . Hiss Holiness Catholicos Karekin II and the former prelate of western U.S.A. , Archbishop Yeprem Tapakian both have served as prelates of New Julfa .

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