

The Family Names of Iranian Jews

Esther Shkalim

Most Iranian Jews, like the Iranian population more generally, had no family names until the mid-20th century. The process of choosing family names began in 1928, three years after the rise to power of Reza Shah Pahlavi, who sought to impose an accelerated process of modernization and secularization on Iranian society. On August 11, 1928, the shah drafted a law obliging every citizen to carry an identity card and to choose a family name.

The names chosen by Iranian Jews were culled from various sources. Many Jews based their chosen names on the first name of their fathers, with the addition of the words *zada*, *zadeh* or *pur*, which all mean "son of." This method led to the creation of names such as Avrahamzada (son of Abraham), Soleimanzadeh (son of Solomon), Haimpur (son of Haim), and Ishaqpur (son of Isaac).

In some cases, the ending *ian* was added to the father's name. This ending, which denotes a plural form, transformed the name Nissan, for instance, into Nissanian (the Nissans), while the name Said came to form the basis of the family name Saidian (the Suids), and so forth.

Others based their family names on the geographical origins of their families. The names Shirazi, Tehrani and Kermanian, for instance, are related to the names of the Iranian cities Shiraz, Tehran and Karman.

Some family names were chosen according to the father's profession. These include the names Najjar (carpenter), Kafash (shoemaker), Hanasab (henna

grinder), Aynehsaz (mirror maker), and Hamami (the owner of a bath house or one of his workers).

Since jewelry making was one of the most common professions practiced by Iranian Jews, some family names relate to various aspects of this profession, including Gavaheri (jewelry maker, one who works with precious stones); Thargar, Thargari or Thargarian (goldsmith); Moffazakar (one who plates jewelry and dishes with silver), a name that has sometimes been changed in Israel to Mofaz; Nokrehsaz (silversmith); Nokrehan (one who crafts silver objects); Botehsazan (one who refines precious metals); Talaian (one specializing in gold), Talasaz or Talasazan (one who crafts gold objects). An additional name, Hakshuri (one who washes the earth), was unique to Jews in the city of Isfahan. It was taken by the men who gathered the dirt and dust off the floor of jewelry-making workshops, washed it and melted down the grains of gold that had fallen into the dust, so that they could be reused.

Both Jewish men and women worked as weavers and textile makers. These professions were referred to by family names such as Karbasi (producer or vendor of cotton products), Mahmalbaf (velvet weaver), Mahmilian (producer or vendor of velvet), Abrishami (producer or vendor of silk), and Rangraz (textile dyer).

Many family names were related to the practice of medicine, which was largely identified with Jews. Family names referring to this profession are Hakim, Hakimian, Hakimzadeh, Tabibian or Tabibizadeh, Pezesgzadeh or Pezeshgazada.