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Women's Memories of Oudlājān:

From A Communitarian Neighbourhood to A Placeless City

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Introduction to the project

As a young researcher in the field of Persian Studies, my aim was to investigate one fascinating and at the same time complex aspect of the Iranian society, focussing on the female religious community of the Iranian-Jews during the turmoil of the twentieth century, who used to live in the old Jewish quarter of Tehran. The primary interest of my Ph.D. research project is to investigate the role of the women inside the religious community of Oudlājān (Sarechāl)¹ and, at the same time, reconstruct their sense of belonging within the great Iranian nation. Indeed, as in many sub-cultures in Iran, the Persian culture and education played a big role in Jewish life, influencing their behaviour and their sense of belonging. The research is contextualized in Tehran, a city chosen as the geographical reference context based on its undeniable central character for observing the social processes of the country, and for its prominent role, especially during the second half of the twentieth century.

The political and historical narrative about the twentieth-century Iran sometimes obscures the myriad micro-stories that take place all around the country, reducing the diversity, in its ethnic and religious sense, to a fragile barrier between societies. In this perspective, the history of the Jews in twentieth century Iran sometimes had been influenced by this limiting narrative, which used to describe the Jewish communities of the country as merely victims, and passive agent of the historical succession of the Iranian events. First of all, while dealing with Jewish subjects in the Iranian context, it is also necessary to consider the different experiences that the Jews faced in Iran, according to the different communities widespread all over the country. For example, the Jews living in big cities, such as Tehran, at least from the second half of the nineteenth century, enjoyed a relatively more freedom and, consequently, more opportunities and possibilities, which had strongly influenced their social transformation and participation in the society. These new opportunities also followed the arrival in Iran of various European and American missions, deployed all over the world. One of these '*missions civilisatrice*'² carried out in Iran was the creation of the first Jewish school in Tehran, with the approval of Naser al-Din Shah. The establishment was promoted by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a Paris-based international Jewish organization. The school, opened in the capital in 1889 and aimed at the unification of the Jews and also the integration of them in the Iranian society, represented for the Tehrani Jews an opportunity in a period of revival of antisemitism in the world.

¹ Oudlājān and Sarechāl are the two names that designate the old Jewish-majority neighbourhood in the south of Tehran. The first term is the one used most frequently in Academia. The second one, which indicates a specific part of the neighbourhood, is mostly used by the old Jewish inhabitants. In this article, the two terms will be used interchangeably depending on the use of the term made by the interviewees.

² Isabelle Headrick, A Family in Iran: Women Teachers, Minority Integration, and Family Networks in the Jewish Schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Iran, 1900–1950, *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 10, no. 4 (2019), 307-322, esp. 310.

The mission of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and of its educational system was to work for the «emancipation and moral progress of the Jews» and to give a support for those «suffering for being Jews, protecting them from backwardness and poverty»³.

The narratives portraying the Jews as merely victims have been strongly influenced by the historic journey the Jews shared with the Iranian land, especially after the advent of Islam in the country, and the impositions against the Jews that were promoted by the Safavid. For that reason, during their long history in Iran, the life of the Jews has been always characterized by a progressive adaptability to the circumstances occurred in the country. Moreover, the Jewish history in the country had also always reflected the perspective of the dominant culture, while embracing different ideologies: this approach helped them not only in their constant struggle for survival, but it also gave the great effort in developing a strong sense of belonging to the Iranian nation.

The specific path of the Jews in Iran has enabled them to establish a historical continuity which dates to the pre-Islamic culture and the Shia traditions, shaping their daily routine and cultural life to both Shia culture and pre-Islamic one. As Tsadik argues, the Jews, who have lived in Iran since centuries, have always been identified for their distinguish character, *Jewishness*, which means that they are part of one group, sharing common believes, customs and one religion.⁴ Nevertheless, since the time of Cyrus the Great, they have been as well part of the great concept of *Iranianess*, which includes them in the notion of the Iranian nation.

Against the background of these considerations, the history of the Jews in the twentieth century, especially in the Tehrani context, had followed a different path: the second half of the century has shown a constant increase in participation of the Jews in the socio-political life of Iran. In this sense, the social vicissitudes that have affected the country in that period have shaped the process of national integration of Jews in Iran and have influenced the process of national unity. Moreover, the turmoil and disorder of the century had provided the Jews a deeper sense of their historical connection to the land in which they reside: the Iranian Jewish identity that emerges from these years and resists the force of dividing currents, is a complex identity, built on the rubble of a troubled history and on a faltering balance, between a deep religious bond and an ancient sense of belonging to the motherland, Iran.

The highlight of the Jewish active participation in the history of Iran in this century, which will be described in these pages, originates from the need to overcome, as suggested by Sarshar, the common historical narrative which refers to the Jews of Iran «exclusively as a passive minority group victimized by the Zoroastrian or, later, Shi'ite hegemony»⁵. On the contrary, the Jews have been an active actor in the history of contemporary Iran, and this dissertation, focussing on the stories and memories of the *mahalleh-ye yahudi*⁶ (Jewish quarter) of Tehran, will try to shed some light on their contribution to the history of Iran in the century.

³ Headrick, *A Family in Iran*, 310.

⁴ Daniel Tsadik, *Identity among the Jews of Iran*, ed., Abbas AmanatFarzin Vejdani, *Iran Facing Others*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 219-242, esp. 221.

⁵ Houman Sarshar, *The Jews of Iran: The History, Religion, and Culture of a Community in the Islamic World*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), XIII.

⁶ Following the establishment of the General Registry Office (*Edāra-ye tabt-e ahwal*) in 1924, also the Iranian Jews required to register their religious affiliation in their ID card. The word used in that occasion for the Jews was the term *Kalimi* (Amnon Netzer, *Kalimi*, In *Jewish Communities of Iran: Entries on Judeo Persian Communities*, edited, ed. Houman Sarshar, (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2011): 376-378, esp. 376). The employment of the term appears to be used more

Going more in details, this project intends to reconstruct the history of the female component of the Jewish community of Tehran that used to live in Oudlājān, the former Jewish quarter of the Iranian capital, and then moved out during the 1950s. The gendered analysis of the issues (daily life, marginality, border neighbourhood, etc) can contribute to ensure an original and distinct interpretation of the situation of the women of Oudlājān and also of the quarter in general. The intent of the research is double. First of all, it is import for registering the presence of women inside the community of the Iranian Jews. Indeed, the traditional Iranian historiography about the Jews of Tehran fails to record the presence of female figures. However, writing history and examining geography from a gendered perspective is more than registering women's presence. It is about adopting a structurally marginal point of view, which discloses a reality that it has been so far overlooked. For this reason, with this research I have tried to subvert the way in which we write this history and how we think about it. Giving voice to women's memories and women's experiences means to make the women of Oudlājān visible especially in social phenomena such as like the question of minority, identity, emigration, integration, modernization, and inequality. As I will discuss in detail later, the history of the Jewish women of Oudlājān is fundamental to the understanding of the processes that have affected the Jewish community of Tehran over the last century. In this regard, we can think about the fundamental role that women have played in maintaining Jewish traditions within a society which, in the mid-twentieth century, was increasingly secularized.

The project is developed according to an interval of time that follows the chronological succession of the historical path of Oudlājān, from the last decades of Reza Shah to the post-revolutionary period. For this reason, each chapter has a brief historical and sociological overview of the period under examination. These historical overviews are not meant to be exhaustive. Indeed, there are several academic texts (which I have mainly used as references in this research) that focus on the period under consideration. The project is built on three topics, which correspond to the progression of the events of the above-described period of time and, consequently, on the three chapters of which this project is composed: Oudlājān during Pahlavi; the transformation of Oudlājān and the abandonment of the quarter; Oudlājān today. The aim is to give voice to the Jewish women of Oudlājān and recall the story of contemporary Tehran from their perspective, while focusing on cultural aspects and daily life memories.

The research aspires also to revitalize the image of the Oudlājān quarter of Tehran: using de-qualifying attributes, the neighbourhood has been often described through images that have determined all its marginality, placing the accent on negative issues such as poverty, lack of hygiene and discrimination. This expressive stigmatizing language is the result of the symbolic adoption of norms, the conception of normalizing ideologies, historical conjunctures, or collective

frequently by that time, while it is not attested in Middle Persian, where the term *Yahud* was more used. *Kalimi* is the proper term for the Iranian Jews and marked the Arabic root meaning of the term, which means to address or to speak. This derives to the epithet given to the prophet Moses as *Kalim-Allāh*. In the Qoran (4.164) we read: *wa kallama allāhu Musā taklim* and it means and to Moses God spoke directly (Netzer, Kalimi, 375). During my interviews I have observed the frequent use of the term '*Kalimi*' and '*Yahudi*' (this is another appellation for the Iranian Jews, which is perceived as less formal but correct). The two terms are not only used in the common daily life of the Iranian people, but also in some official organizations, such as *Anjāman-e kalimiān-e tehrān* e *Sāzemān-e bānovān-e Yahud-e Irān*. I have attested that the use of the word '*kalimi*' is widespread also within the non-Jews Iranians.

representations.⁷ Therefore, although it belonged to the central historical core of the old city, during the massive growth of Tehran, Oudlājān has become a border neighbourhood, located on the edge of the capital. Conversely, this gradual isolation of the quarter has determined the connotation of the perception that the people, who lived outside the quarter, had about Oudlājān, which was seen and mostly described only as a place of discrimination, poverty, and guiltiness. In this context, the Oudlājān dwellers were perceived as merely as victims and passive agents of the historical succession of the Iranian events. The purpose of this research is then to collect memories and stories of the Jewish inhabitants of Oudlājān and through their descriptions and memories respond to these distorted and superficial visions of the neighbourhood: their words can become forms of anti-stigmatization, as the result of a strong feeling of intimacy and solidarity with that place. To this end, the main objectives of this study was:

- Reconstruct the memory of a quarter and of a community.
- Reevaluate the quarter and the history of the Jewish community in Iran.
- Highlight the changes in material and social dimensions of the women of the Jewish community of Oudlājān.
- Explore the ways of living of these women both inside and outside the Jewish quarter.
- Provide a deeper understanding of how political and social shifts before and after the Islamic Revolution have affected the way of living of the community and also, their approach toward religion and private and public space.

As I will examine in detail later on, my choice for this project was to focus on the community of Iranian Jews who still live in Iran today and to give voice to a community that is often forgotten in the Iranian contemporary narrative. Indeed, the majority of works about the case is made by diasporic Iranian Jewish researchers and is already dealing with Iranian Jews in diaspora.⁸ My aim, on the contrary, was to make a methodological and historiographical point by focusing on voices from Iran. In only few cases, I have also interviewed Iranian Jews who reside outside of Iran nowadays.

The complexity of the case study I have worked on in the past years (the Iranian Jews of Oudlājān), especially for its political implications, could require a deeper

⁷ Raffaele Cattedra, *Le parole del territorio. Denominazione e controllo simbolico dei margini urbani come espressione di territorialità politica*, in *Territorialità: concetti, narrazioni, pratiche. Saggi per Angelo Turco*, ed. Claudio Arbore, Marco Maggioli (Franco Angeli, 2017), 275-293.

⁸ See for example the works of Saba Soomekh, whom research deals with the Jews in American: “Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in America” (Purdue University Press, 2016) and “From the Shahs to Los Angeles: Three Generations of Iranian Jewish Women between Religion and Culture” (SUNY Press, 2012); Alessandra Cecolin, who writes about the Iranian Jews in the Israeli context: “Iranian Jews in Israel: Between Persian Cultural Identity and Israeli Nationalism” (I.B. Tauris, London, 2015); Ariane Sadjed, whom research focuses on the Jews of Mashhad and it is based on biographic interviews with Jewish Iranians in Germany, Iran and the United States. The majority of works that deals with the Iranian Jewish question are written by researcher that focuses on memories and sources set outside Iran (see for example the brilliant works of Lior Sternfeld). Moreover, all the most famous Iranian Jewish writers, like Roja Hakakian and Farideh Goldin are now living in diaspora.

analysis that implies also diasporic voices of Jews of Iranian heritage. For this reason, my aim is to continue the path of this research in the future involving a new range of reference sample from outside Iran. In particular, it might be interested to make a comparison between two voices (the Iranian Jews living in Iran and those living in diaspora) and discuss terms like ‘homeland’, ‘diaspora’ and ‘identity’.

Chapter 1

The chapter consists of a brief historical introduction and an analysis of the case study: Oudlājān in the twentieth century.

This first chapter aims to give a narrative form to the Oudlājān neighbourhood of Tehran collecting memories and stories of the Jewish women who used to live in the quarter. My analysis has started in the early 1930s, an era dominated by the figures of Reza Shah and then, in the 1940s, by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. One important aspect, which I am taking into deep consideration for this period, is the reconstruction of the memories and the daily life inside the Jewish quarter. The focus is on three main aspects, like the representation and description of the quarter, the daily life of women in Oudlājān and the sense of place they shared with the quarter.

The large majority of Tehrani Jews were living in Oudlājān for historical reasons, and this gave them the possibility to grow up as a community and to create a social space distinct from the political centre of the capital. The Jews in Oudlājān were capable of cultivating a strong sense of community, and this was also enhanced by the fact of living in a Muslim dominant culture and society: indeed, the collaboration in the labour market for the men of Oudlājān was a way to overcome the condition of minority status in an economy entirely dominated by their Muslim compatriots; while for women, the cultivation of a strong sense of community between the other Jewish women of the quarter was a way to overcome their specific condition of minority in a male-dominated world and society. This specific condition of minority and the fact that Tehran did not have a historical Jewish community resulted in a less integration of the Jews of Oudlājān into the Tehrani society, at least until the first half of the century. Nevertheless, this isolation was also appreciated and maintained by the Jews themselves as a means of protection. The quarter was perceived as a distinct social unit and the fact that it was located in a small area favoured the creation of a strong sense of community within the dwellers. Moreover, it gave the Jews the possibility to regain their identity within a familiarized sphere. Indeed, providing stability and protection contributed to the formation of Tehrani Jewish identity, the distinctive essence in which the people of Oudlājān could identify themselves. From the 1940s, this isolation depended also on the position of the quarter, which was secluded in the southern suburbs of the capital. In this sense, the economic and spatial marginality of Oudlājān grew further with the expansion of Tehran in the twentieth century. All the above-described conditions stimulated the birth of a great and deep sense of community between the women of Oudlājān. the birth of a great and deep sense of community between the women of Oudlājān. For all these reasons, by borrowing a term that had already been used by the author Anne-Sophie Vivier-Muresan⁹, I have

⁹ Anne-Sophie Vivier-Muresan, “Communitarian neighborhoods and religious minorities in Iran: A comparative analysis”, *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 5 (December 2007).

decided to define Oudlājān as a ‘communitarian neighborhood’¹⁰. This expression is of particular importance because it defines the neighborhood through what I believe to be one of the main roles that the neighborhood has played for the Jewish community, and especially for women, over the years. Indeed, it functioned as an aggregator for the community and shaped, inevitably, the life and thoughts of the Jews who lived in the quarter.

An important aspect of the research is that all the stories that I have been told are related to childhood memories and therefore full of sweetness and light-heartedness. Since the project is dealing with childhood memories, the majority of the respondents have brought back life stories connected to significant female figures of their infancy: in these memories, the dominance of mothers, grandmothers and aunts emerges. On the contrary, the figure of the father was somehow marginal and his role within the family quite invisible. Indeed, if the figure of the mother was linked to the daily life of the respondents, the father was mentioned just in specific cases. For example, the father was a prominent figure in relation to the work environment and, especially for boys, he was related to one definite place, the synagogue, namely a male space. Oudlājān seems to be most of all a quarter of women, and this is one of the reasons why, in this work, women have a privileged space.

The quarter was, for women, a space of «collective identity»¹¹, marked by a specific way of living where there was not a division between public and private sphere.

The history of the community is strongly intertwined with the symbolic and material places of the neighbourhood, which have become guardians of the indelible memory of a community and never fail to be mentioned by the interviewees: the schools of Oudlājān, the synagogues, the public baths and the main streets of the quarter are the background to all the life stories which I was told and through them Oudlājān takes shape, reliving in such distant memories. These spaces of memory have, indeed, the ability to give foundation to a certain sentimental identity, becoming themselves a historical and family heritage.

Chapter 2

The chapter consists of a brief historical introduction and an analysis of the case study: The abandonment of Oudlājān and the social transformation of the Jewish community.

The second chapter reconstructs the profound transformation that Oudlājān has faced from the 1950s, in its physical, demographic, social and cultural aspects, also affecting the social relations between the residents. During the 1950s, the gradual abandonment of the old Jewish quarter of Tehran began. This was the natural result of a new urbanism, which started already in the 1930s, in which Tehran was developing northward, leading to a marginalization of the old quarters. Against this

¹⁰ The expression ‘communitarian’ derives from the term ‘communitarianism’, which can be defined as «the idea that human identities are largely shaped by different kinds of constitutive communities (or social relations) and that this conception of human nature should inform our moral and political judgments as well as policies and institutions. We live most of our lives in communities, similar to lions who live in social groups rather than individualistic tigers who live alone most of the time». (Communitarianism - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, first published on October, 2001; substantive revision May, 2020).

¹¹ Amy Mills, *Streets of Memory: Landscape, Tolerance, and National Identity in Istanbul*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 139.

background, also Oudlājān started becoming, more than before, an isolated and marginalized section of the city. The gradual decline of Oudlājān, with the almost complete abandonment of the neighbourhood by its Jewish inhabitants, was due to the construction of new and more «integrated neighbourhoods»¹², particularly in the northern part of Tehran. This new urban policy was adopted without taking account of the value of the quarter and its long history as an «aggregator for the community»¹³.

This second chapter aspires to give a narrative form to the history of the internal migration of the Jewish community of Oudlājān and in particular to the women of this community. Through a collection of memories and life stories, the aim is to retrace the history of a generation that had experienced a deep cultural and religious transition from a community social life in the quarter to a secular society in Tehran. The purpose is to reconstruct the memories and feelings towards the changes occurred in Oudlājān and, consequently, in people's life. Indeed, the transformation of Oudlājān forced a spatial and social reorganization of the women of the community, and also a «remapping»¹⁴ of their identities and practices. I have examined that women had to face a sort of spatial disruption, caused above all by the transformation of Oudlājān, the consequent abandonment of the quarter and the assimilation into a new social area of the city. This was due to different reasons, which are related to their strong sense of attachment to the quarter and to the fact that they shared a familiar and intimate relationship with it. Changes in the rigid structure of the State and the new urban development also facilitated the social changes and social mobility, which passed through a redefinition of a sense of self as Jew and as Iranian. Since then, the quarter has represented for the Jews of Tehran the only source of their identity and the basis of their belongings. Now, they needed to find themselves in a new area of the city, modern and young. This reorganization caused a sense of dislocation: for Jewish women, who had lived inside Oudlājān for generations, it meant losing their identity. Indeed, as argued by McDowell, any sort of 'migration' changes individual and group identities, their affiliations, cultural attitudes, and practices.¹⁵ Women's daily life in the quarter was a repetitive model of standard behaviours, in which everything was well-known and trusted. Women were used to do shopping in the same grocery every day and every local narrow street of Oudlājān was intensively connected with their daily routine. Their new life in greater Tehran was constructed of a succession of new cultural models that they often struggled to feel like their own. Especially for the older generation, it was difficult to leave their familiar spaces and their traditions: indeed, they often preferred to continue shopping in Oudlājān, organizing visits to the ruined neighbourhood on a weekly basis. Moreover, they tried hard to replicate, also in their new environment, the traditional norms that were perpetrated inside the quarter. In particular, Jewish women out of Oudlājān had to fight against a society that was increasingly eroding its religious values. In this regard, they tried hard to reproduce a sense of community with their daily practice toward family and children. Even out of the quarter the traditional norms survived for the older

¹² Houman Sarshar, *Jewish Communities of Iran: Entries on Judeo-Persian Communities*, (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2011), 69.

¹³ Susan Habib, Navid Jamali, Shaghayegh Shahhossein, Please Save Oudlājān as a Museum Without Walls, ed. Riva Raffaella, *Ecomuseums and cultural landscapes. State of the art and future prospects*, (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli Editore, 2017), 106-115, esp. 109.

¹⁴ Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 210.

¹⁵ McDowell, *Gender, Identity, and Place*, 210.

generation of women. They deeply kept their traditions also because their importance within the Jewish community was due to their religious performance at home. For centuries, the role of women in the Jewish community was the perpetuation of the Jewish traditions, ensuring their material and spiritual survival. Less interest in religious life led to a loss of their role in the society, whereas the domestic space meant a perpetuation of the social order or the social rule. In this regard, the house and every action related to the domestic sphere, became, even more than before, a sign of the social position and status of these women. It can be argued that the house became somehow a place of resistance. Women, out of Oudlājān, had to fight for the material and spiritual survival of the community, for the survival of Jewish traditions, and for the survival of all those cultural norms that had contributed to the emergence of their social role.

Chapter 3

The chapter consists of a brief historical introduction and an analysis of the case study: Oudlājān today.

This chapter, which aims to give an insight into the situation of the Oudlājān quarter today, attempts to reconstruct the strong relationship that still binds the former dwellers with their old quarter. Even though the Jewish community of Tehran does not live in Oudlājān anymore, the quarter is still a fundamental part of the community's heritage. In particular, Oudlājān still represents, for many Jews, the source of their Iranian identity, as the place where their roots originated. In this regard, it is important to trace an objective image of Oudlājān today, since it holds memories and stories of unity among the Iranian Jews of Tehran, especially for women. This neighbourhood has been a key element in the construction of the Jewish belonging to the Iranian homeland, having a very important role in the spatial organization and social life of the community. As Hanechee argues, the concept of neighbourhood in the Iranian culture has always been accompanied by senses of well-being, security, and identity; in this regard, the sense of place that the Jews shared in Oudlājān had contributed to constructing their sense of belonging to the Iranian nation, their beloved native soil.

The chapter is constructed with a collection of stories of return to Oudlājān. Most of these stories are from the Jews who still live in Tehran and use to go to Oudlājān every week, especially for the most important Jewish ceremonies. Despite the great difficulties that the Jews had faced since the founding of the Islamic republic, a large number of Iranian Jews has decided to stay in Iran. These people, as referred by one of the respondents, still feel that they belong to Oudlājān and they prefer to frequent the two small synagogues of the old quarter rather than the bigger and modern synagogues in the north of the capital. Other interesting stories are from the Jews who have left Iran, especially after the mass migration in the wake of the Iranian revolution of 1979. They have told me their sensations and feelings in returning to Oudlājān, recalling the stories of their families. In both cases, women, men, and young people who go to Oudlājān every Shabbat or visit it when going back to Iran are like pilgrims fulfilling a nostalgic return to a place which once was their home. In all these stories, I have found the same need for preservation of the quarter and of the community. As referred by Eshagh Amram-Shaoul the new generation needs to know where their roots came from.¹⁶

¹⁶ Eshagh Amram-Shaou, <http://sarechal.com/NewMainPages/Purpose.html>, accessed on 11/03/2021

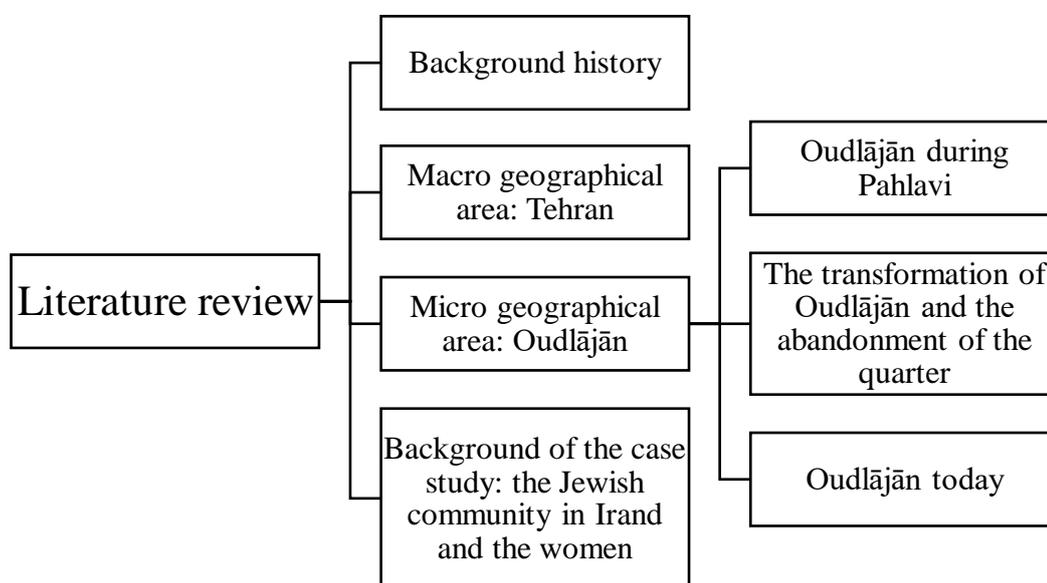
Methodology

The qualitative research: between ethnography and oral history

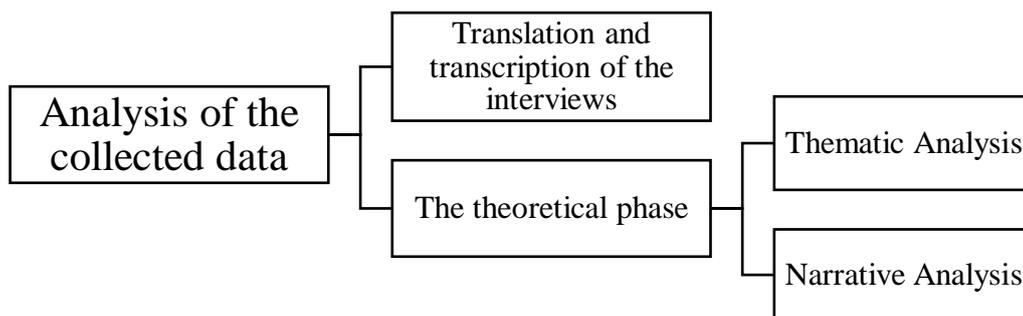
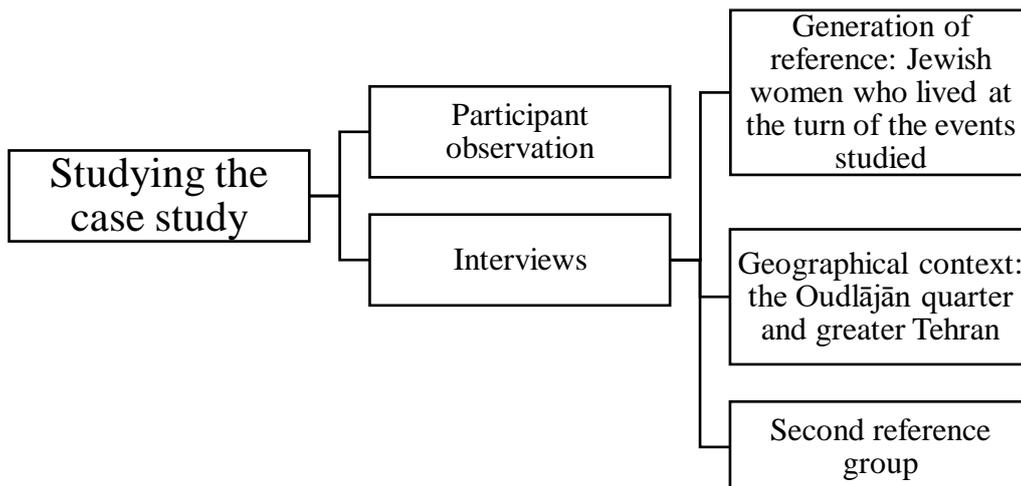
The experience of the Jewish female component in the geographic and cultural area of Oudlājān and Tehran has been analysed as a phenomenon contextualized in the history of contemporary Iran, investigating the decades that trace the political and social vicissitudes of the country from the 1930s, with the advent of Reza Shah. The case study, which is based first on written sources and subsequently reorganized through oral sources, seeks not only the reconstruction of events in a more traditional sense, but has privileged the analysis of the experiential dimension of the subjects. I have chosen to base my research on the diachronic temporal succession of facts, which is based on a system of contributory causes. This chronological succession responds to a methodological need, which, by transforming history into an individual consciousness, makes it possible to progressively identify the impact that certain historical moments and the respective social changes have had on the biographical paths.

The research has been carried out through a qualitative approach, following the guidelines laid down in the work of Luca Ricolfi, *La ricerca qualitativa*¹⁷. He has identified three phases of the qualitative research: the data retrieval phase, which is defined as documentation; the field research phase; the analysis of the collected data and the writing of reports.

The several steps through which this research was carried out can be summarized as follows:



¹⁷ Luca Ricolfi, (a cura di), *La ricerca qualitativa*, (Roma: La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1977).



The documentation phases

For the purpose of my general research project, and in order to achieve the objectives of my work, both primary and secondary data have been collected and used. Regarding the sources, the project aimed to pursue a base investigation of archival and academic materials: the meticulous bibliographic research led me to consult a vast range of scientific literature, newspapers, and magazines of interest. The examination of this material, which took place in a preliminary phase of my doctoral career, was fundamental in determining a clearer direction of the research, specifically the female Jewish community of Oudlājān. I carried on the analysis of these sources in a comparative framework. The review of the existing literature has explained the divergent conditions of the Iranian Jews in the twentieth century, an aspect that has been specifically helpful in drafting the final paper.

Historical written sources are the basis of any historical investigation and has been the sources from which I have developed my research, using different approaches and research strategies. Moreover, the secondary data have contributed to the formation of background information, which were fundamental in order to

build the project in a historical and chronological perspective. Moreover, the analysis of these sources has been essential to build up a constructive historical view of the case study, which it can be summed up as follow:

- Oudlājān during Pahlavi
- The transformation of Oudlājān and the abandonment of the quarter
- Oudlājān today

The documentary research phase had also the important role of shaping the second part of my research, which has been conducted using primary data. For example, it played a fundamental role in the elaboration of what Ricolfi defines as the ‘cognitive questions’¹⁸. This has been useful during the field research and especially during the interviews.

The fieldwork research

The fieldwork phase, as defined by Ricolfi, has been a fundamental part of the research. This was carried out through a specific data collection method, which is based on a combination of observation and participation¹⁹. By making some of the most important assumptions of the ethnographic research as my own, I brought forward what Bronisław Malinowski first defined as ‘participant observation’. The ‘participant observation’ is an intimate and familiar involvement in the life and cultural environment of a given group of individuals, in my case the religious community of the Iranian Jews in the Oudlājān context.

This specific approach to the research has been possible through a series of different fieldwork research studies that I have conducted in Tehran and in particular in the Oudlājān quarter, during the first years of my Ph.D. research. In particular, I would like to mention the two-fieldwork research studies conducted in July-September 2019 and then November 2019. During these months of intense research, I could collect different interesting data, which have helped me to better understand my research objective and also to formulate my theory and then this final report.

The first sources of my research had been autobiographical interviews. The oral sources, which we will have the opportunity to discuss in detail later, were, for me, the first important sources of knowledge of Oudlājān, a quarter that has often been forgotten in the narratives regarding the history of the Jews in Iran. The interviews have been followed by related research (archival materials, academic books and writings), with a support and verification function.

Moreover, the research has been conducted through the collection and then analysis of various ethnographic data that Naghmeh Sohrabi defines as «extra-interviews»²⁰. I have collected sources also from:

- Direct observations: I have participated in different social activities of the community.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 64.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 33.

²⁰ Naghmeh Sohrabi, “Muddling Through the Iranian Revolution”, in *Perspective on history* (online), Nov 1, 2015.

<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2015/muddling-through-the-iranian-revolution> (Accessed: 15 June 2022).

- Informal conversation: I was able to conduct these conversations during my visits in Oudlājān. In this case I have sometimes worked without any technological support and without asking people their name and their specific life story. In this dissertation, these informal conversations have been reported without mentioning the name of the people.
- Religious ceremonies: I have attended different religious ceremonies in the synagogues of Ezra Yagoub and Mollah Hanina.
- Frequent visits to the neighbourhood and its spaces: the community allowed me to have a personal guide who introduced me to the ancient places of Oudlājān and the present-day spaces of the quarter.
- Getting in touch with people allowed me to have access to private written sources, like personal letters, photographs, and family memories.

According to Howell ²¹ the ‘participant observation’ is divided in different phases that I have followed in particular to establish a relationship with the people involved in the research and to immerse myself in the field. They are the following:

- Establishing rapport: the first approach with the case studies consisted in building a strong relationship with the members of the old community of Oudlājān. I have started connecting with them through a friendly approach, trying to explain the aim of the research. Nevertheless, it has not always been easy. In July 2019 I have firstly tried to visit one most important modern synagogue in Tehran, which is located near Meydāne Vali Asr, where I have been greeted by the Rabbi. I have asked to take part in the Shabbat ceremonies, but they refused. I have then tried to have access to the collection of the Jewish Archive, but bureaucracy stopped my desire of knowing this important part of the story of the community of Tehran. In July 2019, thanks to the help of some friends, I got in touch with some members of the community. The same month I have visited the Oudlājān quarter for the first time, trying to know the streets of the quarter, its history, and the situation of the quarter today through the personal memories of my interviewees. This discovering of the quarter made the interviews more intimate. As Naghmeh Sohrabi argues «triggering memory through specific people, places, and things, as opposed to asking their impressions»²² is the way to which I was able to get closer with the people I have interviewed. Since September 2019 I have started my interviews with the members of the community.
- In the Field: I have tried to be accepted by the given group of people, participating in their religious ceremonies and also in their daily activities. Both inside and outside Iran, I have interviewed people with whom I had previously built a closed relationship, through phone calls, emails etc. I had the chance, during the interviews, to be invited for breakfast or lunches, even in private properties. Differently from the institution of the Jewish Community of Tehran, people warmly welcomed me.

²¹ Joseph T. Howell, *Hard Living on Clay Street: Portraits of Blue-Collar Families*, (Garden City New York: Anchor Press) 1973.

²² Naghmeh Sohrabi, “Muddling Through”, accessed on 20 June 2022.

- Recording Observations and Data: when possible, I have recorded my interviews with the support of new technologies. Before the Covid19 pandemic, people never refused to be recorded during the interviews, but most of them asked me to use fictitious names in my dissertation. On different occasions, I was not able (or did not want to) to record my interviews because I was engaged in informal conversations. In this case I have taken notes and then worked to the re-elaboration of the collected data.

The phase of the analysis of the collected data and the writing phase

The final phase of my doctoral research, which lasted about a year, was spent in the elaboration and in the drafting of this work. Before that, I have conducted a deep analysis of the collected data, which has been carried out through two different approaches.

- Thematic Analysis: I have organized the collected data according to the most common themes that I have found in interviews and in all the other types of qualitative data.
- Narrative Analysis: I have categorized the information gathered through interviews and I have tried to find common themes. Through them I have tried to construct a coherent story.

The writing phase, which has been carried out for several months, was not only the epilogue of my research work, but it was also a guide through which to elaborate new observations. In fact, as Ricolfi observes, «writing is not a mere tool for representing results but is itself a tool of discovery».²³

The fieldwork phase: autobiographical interviews

The main source of this research is autobiographical interviews that I have conducted during my Ph.D. research, both inside and outside Iran. They have been collected through the technique of personal interviewing.

I have conducted personal interviews in order to reach the main objectives of this research since interview appeared, since the beginning of this research, to be the most versatile and productive method of communication. Indeed, oral history, which is an effective model of interpretation and reconstruction of the past, appeared to possess the most appropriate methodology to pursue such a research objective. The oral sources play, in fact, a fundamental role in the re-evaluation of the recent history since they are based on personal memory. Indeed, choosing non-standardized historical models from traditional historiography leads to a subjectivation of the discourse, which is the bearer of a profound analysis that interfaces not only with the written sources but embraces non-verbal language, emotions, and life stories.

Oral history is also essential to bridge the gap of the traditional historiography on the analysis of the reality of the Jewish community in the complexity of Iran's history, especially in the twentieth century, and with regard to its political, social and cultural developments. This method, which is used to explore the link between

²³ Ricolfi, *La ricerca qualitativa*, p. 64.

individual lives and wider public events, is fundamental to recount the experience of those who are not, by tradition, the central characters of the Iranian historical memory. Among these, especially in the contemporary common narrative about Iran, women and minorities stand out.

This research is based on a collection of stories and memories composed through different interviews with Iranian Jewish women and, to a lesser extent also men, who have talked about their personal and familiar experiences. The centre of these memories was Oudlājān, which has been described as a familiar quarter. In all the interviews, the constant presence of female figures emerged. Women, as the main characters of the interviews, became central figures of the story of Oudlājān.

The composition of the sample for the interviews has been based on some more general specificities recognized in the general reference group, namely Iranian Jews of Oudlājān:

- Generation of reference: Jewish women who lived at the turn of the events studied, who were included in an age group that allowed them a mature perception of the events. I have selected women with different cultural, family, and economic backgrounds. I have given voice to those people who keep the memories of the changes that occurred in Oudlājān through different visions and perspectives, given their ability to provide us with an intense and multiform insight of their life in and outside the quarter. This allowed me to understand if there is a common vision and perception of the historical period and its implication in the Iranian social life.
- Iranian Jews living in Iran: During this three years of research I have mainly interviewed Iranian Jews who still live in Iran. In only three cases I have interviewed Iranian Jews (two men and one woman) who live outside Iran: two of them live in Rome, Italy, and one in the United States. Although Iranian Jews in diaspora are not part of my reference sample, I decided to do these interviews as they were people related, mainly for family reasons, to some of my interviewees who still live in Iran. Their personal experience and their memories were necessary in the reconstruction of a coherent and understandable work.
- Geographical context of the research: the research is contextualized in two areas, the Oudlājān quarter and greater Tehran. I have chosen to work with the Jewish community of the Iranian capital, first of all because the historical path of Oudlājān, since the Qajar area, was completely different from the other Jewish quarters in Iran. Secondly, for the prominent role that Tehran had in the history of the country, especially in the twentieth century. Indeed, in the city, at least from the beginning of the last century, all the cultural life and socio-political activities that influenced the whole country were concentrated. Tehran was the most suitable centre of investigation for other two main reasons: first of all, the majority of Iranian Jews today are still living in Tehran, but, above all, thanks to the concentration of universities, the Iranian capital has been a centre of attraction for Jews for years. The centralization of the university activity in Tehran has stimulated the development of a strong urban, political, and social culture that influenced the life of the younger generation of Iranian Jews.

- Second reference group: I have collected testimonies also of Jewish men who talked the memories of their mothers and grandmothers in the quarter. Moreover, I decided to dedicate part of the interviews to the Iranian Jews who, at the time of the events that I have examined, were already living in greater Tehran. Some respondents had never had connections with the quarter. Most of them had never lived in Oudlājān, but they deeply knew the neighbourhood because most of their relatives lived there. In this regard, the memories of this work are therefore not only of men and women who had lived in Oudlājān but also of those who have known and loved the quarter, even if only through family memories. These men and women, who have received an inviolable and an indelible heritage through cultural and family transmissions, have been able to tell the story of Oudlājān with equal emotional charge and genuineness.

The interviews and the fieldwork research phase:

Oral history involves an interdisciplinary and dialogical process that combines practice and theory. The primary practical phase was to conduct interviews with women and men belonging to different Jewish communities in Oudlājān. I have developed the interviews on three topics, which correspond to the progression of the events of the described three major phases of the historical path of Oudlājān, following the chronological succession of the biographical itinerary of the interviewees. The biographical path of those who were directly involved in the historical period has given rhythm to the story. This was developed according to a time interval that goes from the family origins of the interviewees to the post-revolutionary period and the situation of Oudlājān today.

- 1) Family of origin and context of growth: I have collected testimonies through which I was able to draw up on a story that traces the family chronological analysis of the interviewees. I was then able to register the prominent presence of female figure in these stories and to collect the perception that my female interviewees had about the life in the quarter. The main objective of this phase was the identification of the sociocultural context of growth and development in Oudlājān and the perception of the quarter by its inhabitants.
- 2) The Pahlavi era: through a privileged gender lens, I have analysed the daily life and the situation of the Jewish minority during the years of the Pahlavi era; the abandonment of Oudlājān and the consequence this phenomenon had for women; the integration of the Jewish community in greater Tehran. The aim was to trace a detailed analysis of the transitional period of the Jews from Oudlājān to greater Tehran and to identify some specific social factors that influenced the integration of the female community of the old quarter in the new areas of the capital.
- 3) The post-revolutionary period: my interviewees talked about the situation of the Oudlājān quarter today as a collective historical heritage. In these conversations related to the current situation of the old Jewish neighbourhood, a common desire of preservation of the quarter emerged.

The situation of Oudlājān today is strictly linked to the story of the Jewish community of Tehran of the last decades. In this regard, the biographical path of the respondents was absolutely important to analyse. In particular, it has been fundamental to identify two micro-reference samples that were necessary to enrich the analysis of the current situation: Jewish women and men who still live in Tehran and Jewish women and men who live outside the country.

The aim was to collect stories of everyday life in Oudlājān today and to analyse the relationship that still binds Oudlājān with its former dwellers.

The research method adopted for the personal interviews had followed the autobiographical narrative method developed by the German sociologist Fritz Schütze. This method appeared to have, since the beginning, «the potential to generate a space for emotional remembering, deep reflection and self-performance»²⁴, for its undisputed ability to analyse «the ways in which personal experiences and emotional trajectories, partially shaped by kinship dynamics, socioeconomic and political processes, can influence identity development and the formation of life attitudes»²⁵. Moreover, as suggested by Szczepanik and Siebert, «the biographical interview implies the definition of the key participant as narrator rather than as interviewee».²⁶ This because it brings the respondents to the centre scene, allowing them to choose and express liberally their experiences. In this regard, the use of this method could also stimulate a self-reflective approach, which is less likely «to happen using structured and semi-structured interview techniques, where frequent questions by the interviewer can hamper a process of deep inner reflection»²⁷.

The method of Schütze about the narrative interview, according to Skinner, is developed in five stages, which I have followed in order to pursue my research objectives:

- 1) Starting the interview²⁸. First of all, I asked the respondents to choose a location for the interview. Before the interview started, I have tried to explain the general theme of my research, specifying the three above-mentioned main topics. I have given my respondents the possibility to freely express themselves and to liberally tell their story.
- 2) Prompting the story through a generative question. In my case the first generative question was related to Oudlājān and their childhood in the quarter.
- 3) The third stage is the telling of the story. I have left the respondents the possibility to tell their stories without any interruptions.
- 4) Asking questions. Once the interviewees indicated that the story was finished, I used to ask some additional questions concerning the

²⁴ Jonathan Skinner, *The interview: An ethnographic Approach*, (London, New York: Berg Publishers, 2012), p. 122.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 107.

²⁶ Renata Szczepanik and Sabina Siebert, “The triple bind of narration: Fritz Schütze’s biographical interview in prison research and beyond”, *Sociology* 50, no. 2 (2016): 285-300, esp. 286.

²⁷ Skinner, *The interview: An ethnographic Approach*, p. 108.

²⁸ Ibidem.

interviewee's biography or some specificities they could have mentioned in their story.

5) Bringing the interview to an end.²⁹

Translation and transcription of the interviews

Most of the interviews were conducted in Persian. Following the guidelines of Schütze, I have asked the respondents to liberally choose the language for the interview. Only in two cases they chose a language different from Persian; on one occasion this language was English and in another case was Italian. In this attempt, I have conducted the transcription and then the translation of these interviews.

The transcription of the interviews was certainly one of the most important phases of all my work. Transcription is, indeed, as Alessandro Portelli states quoting the words of Willa K. Baum, one of the most notable aspects of the interview. He argues that transcribing is a work of art, like translation, even if with less room for manoeuvre³⁰. Transcription is the 'representation'³¹ of the text, which considers various contingent factors, above all because «orality is a discourse in progress, full of attempts, corrections, suspensions, repetitions and redundancies»³².

The theoretical phase

This part concerned the analysis and interpretation of the sources. The identification of the topics of interest was designed based on the relevance of the interviewees' experience with respect to the research topic. First of all, I have proceeded with the analysis of the individual stories and then, as a second step, with the comparative analysis of the interviews: I was then able to formulate a coherent hypothesis, paving the way for further micro-analysis topics. The comparative study of different life stories was necessary to trace generalisable theoretical assumptions. I have followed this approach in order to bring out the elements of commonality among the collected experiences and, at the same time, understand how they operate in front of a general discourse on the female Jewish experience in Oudlājān.

The interviews and Covid-19 pandemic

Covid-19 pandemic, which has shocked the world since March 2020, has required a substantial change also of my research. Beforehand, I had to change my work plans, which included a new phase of fieldwork in Tehran that should have lasted about three months. Secondly, I had to adapt to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and conduct the interviews remotely and with the help of new technologies. This inevitably caused a setback to my research for different reasons.

First of all, the main reference sample were women and men who had lived in Oudlājān before the abandonment of the quarter in the 1950s. Most people are elderly nowadays and it was not easy for them to accept being interviewed remotely. Indeed, many of these people who previously had agreed to face-to-face interviews

²⁹ Szczepanik and Siebert, "The triple bind of narration", 288.

³⁰ Alessandro Portelli, *Biografia di una città. Storia e racconto: Terni 1830 – 1985*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1985), p. 10.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 11.

³² *Ibidem*.

rejected this new methodology. In addition to this, for the interviewees who still live in Iran, the use of new interviews platforms (such as Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, Teams) was even more complicated. This is due both to the restrictions imposed by the Islamic Republic of Iran on the use of certain online platforms and also for security reasons. Therefore, during the pandemic I could conduct fewer interviews than expected.

For the interviews that I was able to conduct remotely, I also had to adapt to a new methodology that was more suitable for a video interview. For this reason, I mainly engaged in semi-structured interviews. One of the most significant things I have noticed is that, unlike previous interviews, people refused to be registered. Only in one case I was allowed to do it. The second aspect, equally significant, is that the interviews conducted remotely lasted much shorter. This because, with this methodology, the deep relationship established between me and the interviewee in presence disappears.

Theoretical framework

*A whole history remains to be written of spaces*³³

The question of the Iranian Identity

This research has tried to take a broad and novel approach to analysing the Iranian Jewish community of Iran, both as a distinct group and as a constituent part of Iran's wider population sharing its national culture. The goal was to find a new way of addressing the question, avoiding many ambiguities, and bringing all discourse back to its starting point: Iranian identity. If we identify Persian roots as the focus and the heart of our investigation, and we establish that a cultural study of the Iranian Jews cannot be separated from the Iranian identity itself, we are not only shifting attention to a common denominator that links a variety of topics, but raise new questions, new issues, and new considerations. The aim was to identify an analytical tool through which we could interpret and relate various outlooks on Iranian identity: the analysis led me to consider religion as the source of a common sense of belonging, in contrast to most scholars whose work is predicated on the dichotomy of 'secularism vs religion'. Instead, the Iranian identity discourse that emerges from this work finds connections and affinities across the common dividing lines represented by religion, ethnicity, and geography. Reinforcing an Iranian discourse through the Jewish experience can constitute a valid response to the deep crisis of the Iranian national question and the enhancement of national, economic, and religious alliances. This research employs a qualitative approach to the framework of national identity, based on the idea of its progressive character and related to the concept of identity as socially constructed. The theoretical assumptions expressed throughout this work have found their empirical explanation in fieldwork that the author conducted in Iran in 2019.

The political and historical narrative about twentieth-century Iran sometimes obscures the myriad of micro-stories playing out all around the country, reducing religion, with the connotation of political ideology, to a fragile barrier between communities. Moreover, this socio-political narrative seems to confine the notion of Iranian identity to a dialectic between two main forces, religion, and territory, which are analysed as though continuously in contrast. The aim of this work is to redraw attention to the role of minorities³⁴, especially the Jewish one, in the construction of the new Iranian national identity and to introduce a new analytic approach on minority studies in contemporary Iran. The qualitative approach followed by this research is drawn from the illuminating works of Smith (1999; 2009) and Hutchinson and Smith (1994), and the ethno-symbolic approach to

³³ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 149.

³⁴ The terminological approach used in this work (where the terms minority (*aqaliyat*) and community - *jame'eh* - are used interchangeably) reflects the historical use of the term minority in the Persian language, and its specification in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran of 1979. *Aqaliyat*, which became the official term designated to represent the non-Shiite religious communities of Iran, is defined as follows: Aqaliyat are all the religious minorities of Iran adhering to a divine religion that are less numerous than the believers of a numerically majority religion. The criteria of distinction between majority and minority appear to be only quantitative. The term is used in the same sense in the pages of this work. For a complete discussion of the issue, see Anja Pistor-Hatam, Non-understanding and Minority Formation in Iran, *Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 55, no. 1, (2017): 87-98.

national identity formation. This approach defined the progressive character of the concept of identity, which is its historical construction, arising from reinterpretation and re-use of the past. National identity, from this perspective, can be defined as «the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths, and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the identifications of individuals with that pattern and heritage and with its cultural elements»³⁵. This approach proves to be the most relevant theoretical framework for the study of Iranian national identity in this paper for several reasons. First of all, the concept of national identity that has been enunciated is based on a territorial and cultural self-understanding of a common sense of identity, defined as «the definition of the existence and belongingness»³⁶. In this sense, the concept of identity applied in this work can be related also to the definition of Tsadik, who defines identity as the «distinguishing character or personality of an individual»³⁷. This notion of identity has been socially constructed over the centuries and determined through the myths and values of the past in «accordance with the special condition of the time process and dependent on time and space»³⁸. Secondly, this concept of identity is related to the idea of the nation as a socially constructed community, imagined by the people³⁹; this notion is significant to underline the important role, in the last century, played by nationalist leaders in mobilizing these identity ideas, according to their own values and understandings of the past. Furthermore, the assumptions on which this work is based are expressed in the extensive works of Ashraf (1993), Azgharzadeh (2007), Holliday (2011), Tsadik (2012), Saleh (2013), Saleh and Worrall (2015) and Reza Zia-Ebrahimi (2011 and 2018).⁴⁰ They are related to the concept of identity in the Iranian context, to the comprehension of the dynamism (not a monolith) of the Iranian society and to the definition of Iran as a multi-ethnic state where a plurality of identities exists. The concept of Iranian identity has been identified by some scholars as problematic since it encompasses a plurality of identities: cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious.⁴¹ Given these assumptions, this research intends to underline how Iranian identity has been constructed throughout the centuries and which values, myths, and tools have been used; moreover, it aims to redefine the most relevant social

³⁵ John Hutchinson and Antony D. Smith, *Nationalism*, (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 18.

³⁶ Hüsamettin İnaç and Feyzullah Ünal, The Construction of National Identity in Modern Times: Theoretical Perspective, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3, no. 11, (2013): p. 223-232, esp. 223.

³⁷ Tsadik, Identity among the Jews, p. 221.

³⁸ İnaç and Ünal, The Construction of National Identity, p. 224.

³⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 1991).

⁴⁰ See: Ahmad Ashraf, The crisis of national and ethnic identities in contemporary Iran, in *Iranian studies*, Vol. 26 n. 1/2 (Winter/Spring 1993), p. 159-164. Alireza Azgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge of Diversity – Islamic Fundamentalism, Aryanist Racism and Democratic Struggles*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Shabnam J. Holliday, *Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2011). Saleh Alam, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Saleh Alam and James Worrall, Between Darius and Khomeini: Exploring Iran's National Identity Problematique, in *National Identities* 17, no. 1 (2015), p. 73-97. Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, "Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the 'Aryan' Discourse in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2011), 445-472. Reza Zia-Ebrahim, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation*, (Columbia University Press, 2018).

⁴¹ Ashraf, 1993; Ayazi, 2003; Saleh and Worrall, 2005.

actors engaged in this construction and how such schemes can be applied to the specific case of Iranian Jewish identity.

When I first embraced my research topic, I faced several problems related to different aspects of minority studies in the Iranian environment. Speaking in general terms, the Jewish community of post-revolutionary Iran is an unexplored field in academic scholarship. Moreover, existing works have consistently portrayed a social community that mostly refrained from political activism during the so-called 'golden age' of Mohammad Reza Shah. On the contrary, very few works have analysed Jewish history during the revolutionary period, a perspective that, as argued by Sternfeld, has led to the exclusion of the Jewish community from the Iranian national historiography.⁴²

Furthermore, scholars usually analyse the non-Muslim communities of Iran from one specific political and ideological perspective⁴³ that is linked to the idea of «Shi'i notions of impurity and on religious tensions»⁴⁴. This logic seems to limit the matter of Iranian Jewish identity, defined as a sentiment of existence and belonging, to a finite perception which is not able to exist in the post-revolutionary period. For instance, as elucidated by Sternfeld, most of the related works are written from a Zionist vantage point, which shows «an inability to conceptualize the transregional and global nature of the Iranian Jewish community»⁴⁵. Further, less is known about interreligious dialogue in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the study of which can contribute to constructing a better view of the country in all its complexity. Another problem related to the study of minorities in the Iranian context has been identified by some authors in understanding of the concept of Iranian identity.⁴⁶ For some scholars, such as Saleh and Worrall, Iranian identity is a problematic concept «due in part to the inclusion of diverse ethnicities, languages, territories, sectarianisms and religious in the modern state»⁴⁷. For most scholars, it seems therefore impossible to think about a national identity combining elements of different cultural identities, especially when religious elements are strong enough to lead to the insurmountable separation of people. Undoubtedly, dealing with the discourse on minorities, the question of identity, and the issues of a cross-cultural perspective are even more complex since we come across a plurality of identities, including religious identity, cultural identity, and no less importantly, national identity. The specific case of the Iranian Jewish community, considered as the core of our investigation, shows how a double identity (Iranian national identity and religious identity) is combined, defined as mainly Iranian but with strong elements of Jewish culture, that is, strongly religious. The specific path of the Jews in Iran has enabled them to establish historical continuity throughout the pre-Islamic and Shia periods, shaping their daily routines and cultural life to adapt to both Iran's pre-Islamic and later Shia culture. As Tsadik argues, the Jews, who have lived in

⁴² Lior Sternfeld, "The revolution's forgotten sons and daughters: The Jewish community in Tehran during the 1979 revolution", *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 6, (2014): 857-869, esp. 602.

⁴³ See: Habib Levy, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran: The Outset of the Diaspora*. Abridged and edited from the Persian by Hooshang Ebrami, translated by George W. Maschke, (Los Angeles, 1999). Soli Shahvar, "The Islamic regime in Iran and its attitude towards the Jews: the religious and political dimensions", *Immigrants & Minorities* 27, no.1, (2009), p. 82-117. Rusi Jaspal, "Antisemitism and anti-Zionism in Iran: the effects of identity, threat, and political trust", *Contemporary Jewry* 35, no. 3, (2015), p. 211-235.

⁴⁴ Sternfeld, "The Revolution's Forgotten", p. 603.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 602.

⁴⁶ Ashraf, 1993; Ayazi, 2003; Saleh and Worrall, 2015.

⁴⁷ Saleh Alam and James Worrall, *Between Darius and Khomeini*, p. 74.

Iran for centuries, have always been identified for their distinctive character, *Jewishness*, which means that they are «part of one group, sharing common beliefs, customs and one religion»⁴⁸. Nevertheless, since the time of Cyrus the Great, they have also been part of the great concept of *Iranianess*, which includes them in the notion of the Iranian nation. As we will analyse later, after the Islamic Revolution (1979), the Iranian Jews were also able to identify themselves as one religious' group among all other Iranians, sharing the same fundamental religious principles as the other communities living in the Iranian soil. Lastly, considering these first statements, we cannot forgo the analysis of the Iranian Jewish community of Iran from a global perspective, trying to delineate an all-encompassing image of the Iranian Jewish community as a whole, as well as a part of the wider national Iranian culture.

In order to overcome the abovementioned difficulties related to the investigation of the Iranian Jewish identity, I have tried to follow a different analytic approach which has helped me to study this topic from a new point of view, considering both spatial and religious identities of the Jewish minority in Iran. The primary approach consists of underlining the common Persian⁴⁹ roots of all religious communities of Iran. This way of addressing the topic helps to avoid many ambiguities, since it brings all discourses back to the starting point of Iranian identity. If we identify Persian roots as the focus and the heart of our investigation, and we establish that a cultural study of Iranian Jews (*kalīmīyān-e īrānī*) cannot be separated from the Iranian identity itself, not only we shift our attention to a common denominator that links a variety of topics, but we raise new questions, new issues, and new considerations. The deep examination of my specific case study, the Iranian Jewish community of Tehran, has helped me to approach the question in a different way, which enriched my research topic and emphasized aspects of Jewish Iranian identity that the existing mainstream narrative does not take into consideration. In reality, the history, perspective, and daily culture of the Iranian Jewish community inverts the general presumption of a conflict of identities and gives us an idea of how national and religious identity can melt together and form a more intense and primarily Iranian cultural identity. To comprehend this concept of double identity, which is necessary to understanding this work, it is first of all essential to define the meaning of being Iranian. Iran is the base of a multicultural substratum, where people with a multiplicity of different ethnic and religious identities live together and define themselves as Iranians. In Iran the sense of belonging to the Iranian nation is as strong as the sense of belonging to ethnic and religious groups and being Iranian is an element that has served as a cohesive force of unity. To better understand this concept, I am convinced that it is essential to rethink the concept of Iranian national identity first of all from a unified perspective, as a product of Iran's heterogeneous multi-religious and multi-ethnic society. In addition, it is quite common to restrict the concept of Iranian identity to a contemporary perspective, using static concepts and notions which only belong in recent decades. The artificiality of the concept that seems to emerge from such a perspective denies one of the founding aspects of national identity: its progressive character.⁵⁰ The construction of national identity is, indeed, a long historical

⁴⁸ Tsadik, *Identity among the Jews*, p. 221.

⁴⁹ While aware of their difference, in this work the terms Iranian and Persian are used interchangeably.

⁵⁰ Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

process, based on a continuity of epochs and traditions and the product of social, mythical, and symbolic processes. In this sense, it cannot be reduced to fit into the arbitrary restrictions of contemporary understandings of Iranian identity produced by the Western values of nationalism and national sovereignty. There is no doubt that Iranian identity has existed, as a sentiment, from well before the nationalistic movements and the construction, in the twentieth century, of the so-called Iranian national identity (*hoviāt-e melli*). It was in long-preceding centuries, during the expansion of the Achaemenid Empire on the Iranian soil, that we witnessed the first manifestation of a national sentiment, an Iranian identity.⁵¹

Indeed, in the construction of Iranian national identity within the Jewish minority, the concept that Smith defines as «territorialisation»⁵², namely the identification of a historical homeland that is claimed as its own, has played an essential role. This identity rhetoric links the notion of Iran to a specific territory. Therefore, the Jews, who have resided in Iran for 2700 years, consider themselves legitimate residents of Iran. The land, in this context, is perceived as the foundation of the national community and therefore as an inviolable identity tool. The question of spatiality or territorialisation has always played a fundamental role in Iranian culture, favouring the construction and maintenance of Iranian identity;⁵³ therefore, the strong attachment to the territory that the Jews had to Iranian soil, linked more widely to their memories and the symbols and myths of their religion, contributed to the nourishment of a profound sense of national identity, which allowed them to develop continuous interactions with other Iranian communities, including the Muslim majority.

The Iranian Jewish experience reveals another important aspect of Iranian identity, the combination of land and religion. In this notion, the sense of belonging to the Iranian soil and belonging to the Jewish faith are combined as two elements that together reinforce the Iranian Jewish identity discourse. One easy example is demonstrated in the intense connection which the Jews share between the religion and the motherland and how the Jews of Iran relate their religious heroes to Iranian soil. For example, a common place of pilgrimage for Iranian Jews is the tombs of the biblical figures of Esther and Mordechai, located in the city of Hamadan. Another famous Jewish legend relates Sarah bat Asher, granddaughter of Jacob, with the city of Isfahan⁵⁴, which is also venerated as the burial place of the prophet Isaiah.⁵⁵ The presence of sacred places on Iranian territory has allowed the homeland to become a powerful cultural resource capable of nourishing a sense of unity. The tombs, as Smith states, are among the most important sacred places in the construction of national unity: as the last home of heroines, heroes, and

⁵¹ See: Frashid Delshad, “Case of religiosity among the Persian Jewish minority in post-revolutionary period and the strategy of the Islamic regime”, *Cura Religionis* 2, (Autumn, 2008): p. 65-79. Afshin Matin-Asgari, “The academic debate on Iranian identity”, ed., Abbas Amanat and Farzin Vejdani, *Iran Facing Others*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.173-192.

⁵² Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism*.

⁵³ Pirouz Hanachee & Naimeh Rezaei, “Living in a historical neighborhood: challenges, opportunities and threats, case study: Oudlājān neighborhood in Tehran”, *Armanshahr Architecture & Urban Development* 7, no. 14, (Summer, 2015): 63-72.

⁵⁴ Sarah bat Asher, daughter of Asher (son of Jacob), is a mystical figure in the Jewish tradition, whose life events are set out in the Old Testament, in *The Light in the Stone*. In the city of Isfahan, a synagogue bears Sarah’s name because it is believed that her ascension to heaven took place there.

⁵⁵ Tsadik, *Identity among the Jews*, p. 225.

prominent historical figures, they induce pilgrims to reflect on the sacredness of the past and of the homeland.⁵⁶

This connection is therefore emphasized by a common sense of belonging: Iran is considered by the Jews as their beloved homeland and their Muslim fellow citizens are considered as brothers (*barādarān-e moselmān-e dini*)⁵⁷. As stated by the researcher Delshad, Iranian Muslims and Jews share the same common identity, based on their common Iranian cultural roots.⁵⁸ Moreover, as Amirpur argues, the strong identification of the Jewish community with Iran and Iranian culture is due to the fact that the majority of Iranian Jews do not feel that they comprise a diaspora, since the Jewish community has always been a part of Iranian culture and society. To this extent, as she points out, the Jewish faith has also become a «domestic religion»⁵⁹.

Another important aspect of the question of the Iranian identity is the role that religion assumed after the 1979 Revolution, especially as an aggregator of the Iranian people. In this regard, religion can be identified as a strong element of belonging for the Jewish community of Iran, capable of showing us the way through which to study the Jewish Iranian community in the present period. Following this logic, while considering the religious element the core of a common sense of belonging, religion can be employed as a new analytical tool through which to interpret and relate various dimensions of the new post-revolutionary Iranian identity. This way of addressing the concept contrast with those theories that are based on the dichotomy of ‘secularism vs religion’. From those perspective, the notion of Iranian identity seems confined to a distant past and unconceivable—or unattainable—in the present. Instead, the Iranian identity discourse that emerges from this work finds connections and affinities traversing the common dividing lines of ethnicity, geography, and most of all, religion. In order to place religion at the heart of this investigation, it is first of all necessary to entirely rethink the religious element. Using this approach, it is important to set aside the Western universalistic perception of Iran as a solely Muslim country, and to study it as a fluid entity of human and religious interactions. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that Muslims, as the majority religious group in the country, are engaged in different dialogues with the other religious groups, and that this dialogue is possible because each side shares the same values of Persian roots and religion. In this context, the distinction between majority and minority religions on the Iranian soil appears to be purely quantitative. For this reason, the use of the terms minority and majority cannot be seen as a formalization of the Shia predominance over the rest of the Iranian religious communities, but a method of identification of the religious groups that are, without any doubt, part of the nation. Related to our

⁵⁶ Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism*, p. 95.

⁵⁷ This expression quoted in Delshad (2008, p. 66), appeared in an article of the quarterly journal of the Iranian Jewish community, *Ofogh-e Binā*. Moreover, the use of this expression, which denotes a common sentiment of solidarity and familiarity, has also been used on different occasions by Muslims including leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran. As reported by Pistor-Hatam, (Pistor-Hatam, *Non-understanding and Minority Formation*, 91), Ayatollāh Khomeini referred to the religious communities of Iran as brothers.

⁵⁸ Delshad, *Case of Religiosity*, p. 66.

⁵⁹ Katajun Amirpur, “Iran’s policy towards Jewish Iranians and the state of Israel. Is the present Iranian state Islamofascist?”, *Die Welt Des Islams* 52, no. 3/4, (2012): 370–399, esp. 384. By the expression domestic religion, the author seems to be referring to the fact that the Jewish religion has become an integral part of Iranian culture, to the point that it has been considered a religion native to the land of Iran since the arrival of the Jews during the Achaemenid empire.

specific topic, another factor which could contribute to hindering a wide-ranging vision of the Iranian Jews is the so-called religious opposition between Judaism and Islam.⁶⁰ This religious element is often so prominent in the narrative about the Jews of Iran that a comprehensive depiction of them seems unattainable. However, unlike the more rigid conceptions of identity where the religious element prevails as a negative tool, in this notion the land and one's belonging to the Iranian nation assume a central role, shaping and emphasizing one's belonging to a religious group as well. Therefore, in the notion of Iranian identity there is a specific element, which is religiosity, that cannot be separated from the Iranian identity itself, but becomes an important and necessary part of it. The shape of national Iranian identity during the long history of Iran until recent years has also been formed with a strong sense of belonging to a specific religion, which helped to construct a strong and imperishable identity.

The obstacles related to a project focusing on minority identity can be overcome through the adoption of a different approach, capable of identifying the key elements of identity, which are independent of political discussions or social and religious contrasts. The goal to recognize the elements of commonality that can explain the relationship between a hypothetical minority and a majority and the historical ordeal that accompanies this relationship, is not always easy to achieve. In the Iranian experience, Iranian identity must be read as a balance of land and religion, two elements sometimes studied as though in opposition. In this context, analysing and comprehending the elements of land and religion reveal the link between the sense of belonging of the Jewish community and the notion of Iranian identity. This approach to Iranian identity, as a combination of a sense of place and belonging to a religious faith, has always distinguished the Jews from other religious communities of Iran, such as the Armenian Christians. The latter has maintained a different identity of their own, far from the Persian paradigm, but also far from the Islamic one, into which the Jews were able to integrate themselves because they share similar characteristics.

Space, Place, Sense of Place and Espace Vécu: geographical concepts applied to the study of Oudlajān

Before analysing in detail the concepts of 'sense of place' and '*espace vécu*', it is necessary to clarify other important aspects that are essential for the understanding of this case study. They are all related to the concept of space and to the use of the space. First of all, this analysis is intertwined with two other important terms used in the field of geography: space and place. The concept of 'space' is conceived in relation to individual landscape elements as their «environments»⁶¹. Place refers to how people are related or attracted to a certain space. Place is also identified as a location created by human experiences and, for that reason, it is filled with meaning

⁶⁰ Public opinion and the media sometimes identify the relationship between Iran and the State of Israel as reflecting insurmountable opposition between Islam and Judaism. However, in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran of 1979 (article 13, amended in 1989), the Jews are recognized as an official minority (*aqaliyat*), based on a tradition that relies on the Qur'an and Sunna. The Jews (together with Zoroastrians and Christians) are considered People of the Book (*ahl-e ketāb*) and adherents to a divine religion (*din-e elahi*), which means that they have a special status because their religion is based on Divine Revelation and monotheistic faith (Uriah Furman, "Minorities in contemporary Islamist discourse", *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 4, (2000), p. 1-20, esp. 3.

⁶¹ Elise Mazúr, "Space in geography", *GeoJournal* 7, no. 2 (1983), p. 139-43, esp. 139.

by these people who have lived this space. In this regard, De Groot argues «individuals and groups make, contest, control and negotiate spaces, shaping them through relationships and movement as well as by using material cultural legal or political resources»⁶².

After this introduction, it is important to remark that in this research, space and spatial elements will be read in their implications with the gender, adopting an approach that De Groot defines as «intersectional». In particular, issues such as public and private space and the space of women and the space of men will be analysed. Both issues have been at the centre of the reflections of gender historians since the 1970s. In addition to these authors, the work of Doreen Massey on the women's space is still of particular importance. Indeed, she applied gender theories and feminist thought to disciplines like urban history and geography. Many scholars, thanks to Massey's studies, were able to combine «the analytical categories of gender and space to demonstrate how specific spaces or understandings of space and place were gendered, and how gender differences are partly created through the organization and representation of space»⁶³.

Spatial analysis, in this research, is also necessary in order to overcome the common orientalisating assumptions that emphasise the role of women inside the house as the symbol of segregation, seclusion and backwardness. As De Groot argues:

Gendered spaces need to be explored intersectionally, giving due attention to class/status, to religion and occupation to ethnicity and community and to global power structures. They also need to be understood as interactive and relational, considering the roles of movement, of liminality and of mutually constitutive processes⁶⁴.

With the first chapter, which focuses on the daily life of women in Oudlājān and their fundamental role within the family and consequently within the Jewish community, I have tried to operate a revaluation of women's experiences inside the home. The exaltation of the domestic space as a place of empowerment, of which I have spoken extensively, has followed the work of different authors, also of non-Iranian heritage. In particular, the work of Angela Davis has been illuminating. Indeed, she defines 'housework' as a «fluid product of human history»⁶⁵. In the past, as she argued, «women's central role in domestic affairs meant that they were accordingly valued and respected as productive members of the community»⁶⁶. The devaluation of domestic life operated by a certain modern culture, especially after industrialization, has led to a devaluation of the role of the woman who works in the home. In this regard, Angela Davis argues: «an important ideological by-product of this radical economic transformation was the birth of the 'housewife.' Women began to be ideologically redefined as the guardians of a devalued domestic life»⁶⁷. So, according to bourgeois ideology, the housewife is perceived merely as

⁶² Joanna De Groot, "The space of gender and the gender of space: some thoughts from a historian of Nineteenth century Iran", paper presented at *VIII Congresso della Società Italiana delle Storie* 2021, June 9 2021.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p. 18.

⁶⁵ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, race, class*, Vintage Books Edition, New York, (1983), cap. 13, p. 2.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*

⁶⁷ *Ivi*, p. 3.

«husband's lifelong servant» and as «man's eternal servant»⁶⁸. This ideology established the housewife and the mother as universal models of womanhood. Angela Davis criticizes the fact that there has never been a debate on whether domestic work can become a social opportunity. She argues: «The shortage, if not absence, of public discussion about the feasibility of transforming housework into a social possibility bears witness to the blinding powers of bourgeois ideology. On the contrary, the contemporary women's movement has represented housework as an essential ingredient of women's oppression»⁶⁹.

Through the story of the women of Oudlājān, who I have depicted both inside and outside their old quarter, I have tried to subvert this ideology. Indeed, a proper analysis of the situation of the women of Oudlājān, which I have carried out through personal memories, demonstrates the necessity to revisit these common ideas about «the confining and 'domestic' character of household space and its complex gender dynamics»⁷⁰. Indeed, houses are dynamic spaces «where women move in and out»⁷¹. They are spaces of power and resistance that «can be invaded, and where women negotiate with patrons and relatives over marital, sexual, and household arrangements»⁷². At the same time, Oudlājān will be analysed as a dynamic space that provided a space for women to move and interact. Undeniably, women as well as men have lived the quarter, while shopping in its urban bazaars, while using the baths, and finally while using streets as routes to social visits.

At this point, I can examine in detail how the concept of space has been declined in this research through the concepts of 'sense of place' and '*espace vécu*'. The two notions are both fundamental in geography and have an important meaning also in this project for analysing the relationship between the Jewish dwellers and their traditional quarter in Tehran.

The concept of 'sense of place' is related to the sense of attachment that people have with their space. The term is used to characterize the relationship between people and the spatial settings, which holds a special meaning for them. The sense of place can be generally described «as a complex concept of emotion and attachment to the human environment which is created from people adoption and use of places. This relationship is created from interaction between people and the place»⁷³. One of the most important theories about the concept of 'sense of place' has been elaborated by Yi-Fu Tuan. The geographer talks about the concept of 'topophilia', which has been described as the affective bond between people and place of setting. David Hummon, in his book 'Community attachment: local sentiment and sense of place' refers: «by sense of place I mean people's subjective perceptions of their environments and their more or less conscious feeling about it». The concept of 'sense of space' is fundamental in this research that deals with the historical memory of the female Jewish community of Oudlājān. In fact, the concept relates personal history with space, which in turn becomes an integral part of personal history. In this case, as defined by Jennifer Cross, the concept is related

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 3.

⁷⁰ De Groot, p. 17.

⁷¹ Ibidem.

⁷² Ibidem.

⁷³ Hashemnezhad Hashem et al., "Comparison the concepts of sense of place and attachment to place in architectural studies", *Malaysia Journal of Society and Space* 9, no. 1 (2013), p. p. 107-117, esp. 107.

to the 'biographical relationship'⁷⁴ between people and their space. For our analysis, the concept of sense of place is applied to Oudlājān and its Jewish community.

The 'sense of place' the Jews share with Oudlājān is due to different reasons, one of these is the fact that the majority of the Jews I have interviewed were children when they lived in the quarter. Indeed, these childhood memories have echoed the formation of a strong and durable 'sense of place', a feeling of belonging that still binds, after so many years, the Jews of Tehran to their beloved neighbourhood.

One of the major assumptions in which this research is based is the concept of *espace vécu*, which I had applied to the study of Oudlājān and to the relationship of the Jewish women with the quarter. The concept, which has been developed by the French geographer Fremont in 1976, is based on the idea of the subjective perception of the landscape. It is not a question of objective reality, but of how this reality is perceived and therefore also symbolically represented. In this regard, we can understand how the relationship between the women and Oudlājān developed and therefore how the quarter was represented. How the women used to live in Oudlājān was in fact determined by a series of factors that are related, above all, to the emotional value that linked them to their historical neighbourhood. Moreover, as argued by Fremont, people who live in society build their own territory, their geographical space, based on the needs of the individual and the community.⁷⁵ The lived space is the space that people appropriate, with their paths, their perceptions, their signs and their impulses and passions.⁷⁶ Indeed, the 'lived space', as defined by Fremont, is not a space built therefore only by material elements (although these still assume a great importance in the perception of the quarter) but it is a space to which a deep and emotional meaning is given. In this regard, we can define Oudlājān as a personal and subjective space that has been built since childhood thanks to the interaction of different elements, which were decisive in the way the people have lived that specific space. In this regard, Fremont identifies various classification criteria, which are decisive in the construction of the 'space lived' by people. These elements, called as 'personal variations in the lived space'⁷⁷, do not only affect the way of living that particular place. Indeed, these elements also influence the perception of that specific space and therefore its representation. For this research, these elements of classifications were fundamental to understand how the way of living the neighbourhood by women was different from the way of living of the men and the same goes for children compared to the elderly. Each of these categories has in fact experienced the neighbourhood differently. Moreover, I have identified a different way of approaching Tehran once they left Oudlājān in the fifties.

These classification criteria are age, gender, social classes, and culture. Fremont points out that in the different variations of the lived space, age is a fundamental factor. The different generations have, in fact, a different way of approaching space. This criterion of classification of the 'lived space' turned out to be fundamental in various circumstances.

The first criterion, which I have taken into consideration while approaching the different way of living of the community, is gender. As argued by Fremont the

⁷⁴ Jennifer E. Cross, 'What is Sense of Place?', paper presented for the *12th Headwaters Conference*, Western State College, November 2-4, 2001.

⁷⁵ Armand Fremont, *Vi piace la geografia?* (Roma: Carocci, 2007), p. 83.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ *Ivi*, p. 89.

space, in its deepest composition, is always «binary»⁷⁸: indeed, there is a space for men and a space for women. This is a true concept if applied to the Jewish community that lived in Oudlājān in the early decades of the twentieth century and then in greater Teheran starting from the fifties. Indeed, as we will analyse later in this research, women were more related to the internal space, and in this case, Fremont talks about 'internal sexuality', while men were more connected to 'external sexuality'⁷⁹. In fact, women had the task of housing, shopping, and caring for the children, while men's space was more linked to the outside world, especially to work, which, starting from the 1930s, had led many men to work outside Oudlājān. As briefly mentioned before, the internal space that is linked to women must not be understood only as a space of segregation but also as a space of resistance.

The memories of Oudlājān that are reported in these pages, are above all, childhood memories. In this sense it is clear that children perceived Oudlājān, above all, as a space for play and family and therefore they lived in the neighbourhood with great serenity and light-heartedness. As reported by the interviewees, for the parents Oudlājān represented the family, but it was also the symbol of a social condition of marginalization from which they wanted to escape. For their grandparents, Oudlājān represented home, the place they had lived in for generations and which kept their memories and traditions as Jews and Iranians. The age factor will also be fundamental in the second chapter, especially in the comparison between generations. In fact, for the younger generation that had grown up in Oudlājān, it was easier to adapt to the new life in the modern neighbourhoods of Tehran, since it represented for them a great opportunity. For their grandparents, it was more difficult to adapt to that new life and the older generation would always try to recreate Oudlājān in the spaces of the new city.

The other two variants that Fremont elaborated in his definition of the lived space are social class and culture. These two elements of classification are extremely connected. In my research these classification criteria were fundamental, especially in the second chapter. As I will clarify later, in Oudlājān belonging to a social class did not determine an important variation in the creation of lived space. In fact, the way of life of the inhabitants of Oudlājān was almost similar, whether they were rich or poor families. In this sense, the school, open to all children of all social classes, has played an essential role in building an egalitarian society. Economic and social inequalities, although they also existed within the neighborhood, were somewhat weakened by a sense of common belonging that united all social classes and religions. Furthermore, these inequalities were less visible and perceptible than those existing between the inhabitants of Oudlājān and those, even among Jews, who lived outside the neighborhood space.

The cultural and economic variant, on the other hand, played a fundamental role in the way of appropriating of the space when the Jews left Oudlājān for the neighbourhoods in greater Tehran. In fact, access to those new spaces, progressively larger, and the way of living in those places also depended on belonging to a social class. Furthermore, the wealthiest families first felt the need to leave Oudlājān, even before the total transformation of the neighbourhood in the 1950s. In this regard, these families have more easily adapted to the new urban reality: this may also depend on the fact that the spaces they were going to live in were larger and more comfortable. Moreover, the new neighbourhoods located in the north part of Tehran were full of services.

⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 90.

⁷⁹ Ibidem.

Giving voice to the Oudlājān dwellers: the need for a return to memory

Giving voice to ordinary people, who with their memories can give us a true and genuine portrait of the Oudlājān neighbourhood, is an approach to the historical research that was first developed by the two French historians M. Bloch e L. Febvre. The two authors have enunciated their theories in different works. The first one was the 'Annales d'histoire économique et sociale' in 1929. The same work appeared then in 'Annales d'histoire sociale' (1939-41), 'Mélanges d'histoire sociale' (1942-45), 'Annales. Économies. Sociétés. Civilisations' (1946-93), 'Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales' (dal 1994). The historical research, which was developed by the two authors, aimed to broaden the horizon of observation of the historian through discovery of new objects and subjects. This had to happen through the support of social sciences and with the use of new sophisticated quantitative methods. That moment was the start of what Jacques Le Goff first called *la nouvelle histoire*, the 'new history'. This new approach to the study of history is characterized by a strong attention to personal and collective emotions, to social aspects that might influence history (like religion), and a strong attention to common people and their daily life and personal story. Through this new approach, which has been defined as revolutionary, marginal figure such as women and minority groups emerged, while becoming the central character of the interests of the historiography.

Following this new approach to personal life stories, also the rise of memory studies in the field of history began in the 1970s. This vision started from the need of a new approach to historiography, which had to take into consideration the personal feeling of the people who were affected by that particular event. The memory studies aim to give voice to the people affected by that particular historical event, recalling it through their personal feelings and sensations.

Following this new approach to the study of history, the purpose of my research was to show how memory can play an important role in shaping the sense of place of an individual and how it can contribute to changing the traditional narrative about Jewish history in the Tehrani context. In order to pursue this research objective, which is necessary to recall the story of Oudlājān from a different and new perspective, this research has been built, above all, on autobiographical interviews and memoirs with Iranian Jews who used to live in the Oudlājān neighbourhood or have memories of their families living there. The goal was to give voice to these Jews who still retain a genuine and truthful memory of the neighbourhood, and that can represent it with great dignity and value. In this respect, I have given voice to those who keep memories of the Jewish quarter through different visions and perspectives, given their ability to give us an intense and multiform insight into life in the neighbourhood. The collected testimonies are therefore not only of men and women who had lived in the neighbourhood but also of those who have known and loved Oudlājān, even if only through family memories. These men and women, who have received an inviolable and an indelible heritage through cultural and family transmissions, have been able to tell the story of Oudlājān with equal emotional charge and genuineness. This need to tell the story of the neighbourhood from different perspectives derives from the very nature of memory that has multiple declinations itself.

The use of oral history and sources that involve the recall of memories originates, first of all, from the need of rewriting the silent history of the Jews in

Tehran. Indeed, the common historical narrative refers to the Jews of the capital exclusively as a passive minority group victimized by the Zoroastrian or, later, Shi'ite hegemony. All the history of the Jews in the twentieth century Iran had sometimes been influenced by this limiting narrative portraying the Jews as merely as victims and passive agent of the historical succession of the Iranian events. On the contrary, the Jewish community was a dynamic actor in the history of contemporary Iran, and, through these pages, I am trying to shed some light on their history in the capital.

The literature corpus, especially in the Iranian American context, shows dominance of memoirs, which are preferred as the most relevant type of literature production, because of the involvement of personal life stories.⁸⁰ In most of the cases, memory is also the only source of production, for its ability to recount silent stories, like the one of the Jews in the Tehrani context. In this regard, as referred by Nasrin Rahimieh «memory can serve as a reliable form of documentary evidence»⁸¹, which is essential, above all, to bridge the gap of the traditional Iranian historiography; this is applicable specifically on the analysis of the reality of the Jewish community in the complexity of Iran's history and with regard to its political, social and cultural developments. The use of memory as a source of history is sometimes understood as problematic, because of the involvement of different agents and factors, which might affect the veracity of the story. Indeed, Jasmin Darznik states: «What we remember is not what was, but what we saw, and that recollection, in turn, is altered and amended over time by other subjective factors».⁸² This evidence should not be perceived as a limit on the use of memory by historians, but it should itself be understood as a factor worthy of study and research. In this context, the dichotomy that Pierre Nora made in his book between history and memory takes on an important significance. He distinguishes between history and memory, referring to the first one as the feature in which our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past while defining memory as «social and unviolated».⁸³ Therefore, in our analysis, history, as a social construct, is how the story of the Jews and Oudlājān has been created and handed down by the outsiders, without taking into consideration personal feelings and life stories. On the contrary, memory represents the perception of this story, which is read through the lens of the insiders, the Jews of Oudlājān.⁸⁴ Memory is then the representation of the past by specific individuals who can reinterpret some historical events according to their sentiment. Memory, which is perceived as a strong identity element⁸⁵, has the opportunity to change the narrative of that particular event and influence the personal perspective of the people involved in that story. Moreover, it arises from the need of narration by a specific individual and group of people.

⁸⁰ See for example the works of Gina Nahai, Dalia Sofer and Farideh Goldin. For a more exhaustive approach to the question, I recommend Nasrin Rahimieh, “Flights from history in Gina Barkhordar Nahai and Dalia Sofer's fiction”, in *The Jews of Iran: The History, Religion, and Culture of a Community in the Islamic World*, ed. Houman Sarshar (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), p. 203-219.

⁸¹ Ivi, p. 203.

⁸² Jasmin Darznik, “Dreaming in Persian: an interview with novelist Gina Barkhordar Nahai”, *Melus* 33, no. 2, (June 2008), p. 159-167, esp. 160.

⁸³ Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire. Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989), p. 7-24, esp. 8.

⁸⁴ Contrary to these assumptions, for some scholars, like James Young the distinction between history as that which happened and memory as that which is remembered of what happened is forced and problematic. See for example: James Young, *The Texture of Memory* (Yale University Press, 1993), p. 58.

⁸⁵ Jacques Le Goff, *Storia e memoria*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1986), p. 5.

Indeed, as Portelli states, «memory is an intimate and collective fact, placed between event, imagination and story, between history and subjectivity; between narrators and storytellers who continually mix their roles»⁸⁶.

Memories become sources of history, even if they are often characterized by inaccuracies and omissions, deliberate or not. Indeed, differently from history, memory is not «static or predetermined»⁸⁷. This means that there is no absolute historical truthfulness, above all because the context of growth and development of the individual inevitably conditions the individual memory. Each individual memory, albeit often inaccurate and conditioned by events, has a great social value, because it is the result of a specific historical, social, and cultural context and of external social interactions. For this reason, every testimony must be taken as a complex testimony, as it tells the story of the one who narrates. In this regard, Pierre Nora specifies:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past⁸⁸.

Memories represent the vision of one particular event or reality that, as already specified, has been influenced by several factors. In our case, memories have been inevitably influenced by the childhood filter. In fact, the life stories that are reported in these pages are mostly childhood memories and therefore devoid of malice and anger. Children can observe with pure eyes and modulate reality, according to their taste and desire. For example, in describing the house of her grandfather, Shehrazād⁸⁹ employed particularly suggestive expressions, which give us a regal image of the house. Although it was a simple but dignified house, in her eyes it looked beautiful. She refers: «My grandfather's house in Oudlājān was like a Roman house, extended like a Pompeian house: it was large and was facing North, South, East and West»⁹⁰.

During the 1950s, the gradual abandonment of the old Jewish quarter of Tehran began. This was the natural result of a new urbanism, which started already in the 1930s, in which Tehran was developing northward, leading to a marginalization of the old quarters. This would have caused two related phenomena: a deterioration and a physical decline of the traditional urban section of Tehran, and a consequently increased gap between the north and the south of the capital. According to this, also Oudlājān started becoming, more than before, an isolated and marginalized section of the city. The result of this condition was a slow but strong decline of the quarter.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Portelli, *Biografia di una città*, p. 19.

⁸⁷ Mills, *Streets of Memory*, p. 14.

⁸⁸ Lior B. Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth Century Iran*, (Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 8.

⁸⁹ In order to help to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the interviewees in this work fictitious names will be used.

⁹⁰ Personal interview, January 2020. My translation from Persian.

⁹¹ The abandonment of the neighbourhood by the Jews was a slow but gradual phenomenon that began around the 1930s under Reza Shah Pahlavi. The new life of the Jews in greater Tehran coincided with the beginning of the Shah's new policy which aimed at the modernization of the

With the abandonment of the neighbourhood, the use of memory is even more decisive, because memories and life stories become traces of something that was but is now absent. When the Jews abandoned Oudlājān, as reported emotionally by Sari, they left a «neighbourhood in ruins»⁹² behind them: together with the quarter, the history of many families and of an entire community was crumbling. Therefore, in the recourse to memory, there is also a natural need for self-preservation. This shows how memory is a necessity in a society characterized by a deep cultural oblivion, like the Iranian one, especially when dealing with Jewish history in the capital.

In this respect, memory, which arises from the need to rewrite the self, becomes the will to come out of isolation and oblivion. In this sense, also the ‘places of memory’ of a community have an important role that can be abridged by the definition of Pierre Nora, who states: «Lieux de memoire are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that was barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it»⁹³.

Moreover, memory can help to construct the future without making the same mistakes of the past. In this respect, the words of Eshagh Amram-Shaou, an Iranian Jew living in the United States of America who spent all his life in retracing his roots in Oudlājān, are particularly emotional. He writes:

Our grandchildren need to know where we came from, the consequences of our lives in Iran. If we help them understand the pain of the discrimination and prejudice we experienced, perhaps this will enable them to help eliminate such pain from the world⁹⁴.

Writing the history of the Jews of Oudlājān is a task that has been entrusted to me by many, and which I hope to honour through these pages.

A note on translation and transliteration

All translations from Persian and Italian are mine unless indicated otherwise.

For the terms that are reported in Persian in the text, I am using the *Association for Iranian Studies* transliteration scheme. For purposes of readability, this thesis does not use any diacritics for the names of individuals, unless in specific cases like ‘*Ayatallāh*’. Anglicised forms for foreign words, and place names, such as Mashhad or Tehran, found in the Oxford English Dictionary Online have been utilised in this book. For the name of the quarter, I have followed a specific transliteration and diacritics have been used: Oudlajān.

country. At the same time, he tried to promote his cosmopolitan vision of the city of Tehran, based on European models. The Jews felt they were an integral part of this new urban culture, and from that moment, more decisively, they took part in the political and social life of Tehran. For a comprehensive approach to the history of Iranian Jews in the twentieth century, I recommend reading Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*.

⁹² Personal interview, November 2019.

⁹³ Nora, *Between Memory and History*, p. 9.

⁹⁴ Eshagh Shaoul, “Its purpose, background, memories and hopes”, *Sarechal.com* (December 2003). Available at <http://sarechal.com/NewMainPages/Purpose.html> (Accessed on 12, April 2020).

Consonants:

z	ض	b	ب
T	ط	p	پ
Z	ظ	t	ت
‘	ع	s	ث
Gh	غ	j	ج
F	ف	ch	چ
Q	ق	h	ح
K	ک	kh	خ
G	گ	d	د
L	ل	z	ذ
M	م	r	ر
N	ن	z	ز
H	ه	zh	ژ
V	و	s	ص
Y	ی	sh	ش
‘	ء	s	ص

Vowels:

short	long	diphthongs
A	a or ā	-
E	i	ey
O	u	ow

For the *ezafeh* I have followed this rule: *-e* after consonants, e. g. *ketāb-e* and as *-ye* after vowels (and silent final *h*).

Date

All dates are given as Western calendar dates. Iranian calendar dates are calculated using Iran Chamber Society's converter tool. Sometimes Iranian dates are used for sources, publications and for temporal references during interviews, and are given with their Western calendar correspondent.

Chapter 1

Oudlājān in the first half of the twentieth century: a communitarian neighbourhood.

1.1 The history of the Iranian Jews in the first half of the twentieth century

The history of the Jews at the beginning of the twentieth century is characterized by a constant instability, which was due to the political unrest of the nation. Moreover, various international events exacerbated the tensions and the difficulties of the Jewish communities all over the country: in particular, the economic problems showed their side effects on the Jewish communities, the life of which was spent in a fight of survival.

1.1.1 *The Constitutional Revolution and the rise of Zionism in Iran*

At the beginning of the century, the Iranian public opinion strongly demanded a change in the political and social sphere of Iran. One of the main reasons of this public discontent was the economic situation of the country, in particular the rising cost of food. The demands of the society culminated in the *Enqelāb-e Mashruteh* (Constitutional Revolution), 1906-1911. The tensions caused by the political and economic instability also led the Jewish communities of Iran, especially those living in big cities, to fully participate in the process of construction of a new Iranian political space. For the first time, the Jews were visible actors of this new political process, overcoming a long history of social and political exclusion and discrimination. Indeed, only a few years before, in 1896-1897 the cleric Sayyed Reyhanollah issued a *fatwa* to force the Jews of Tehran to wear a Jewish patch and to cut their hair, in order to be recognizable.

There is one important aspect that contributed to the reception of the messages and values of the Constitutional movement on the public opinion, and so on the Jewish communities, especially in big cities such as Tehran: namely, the constant involvement of newspapers, like the reformist newspaper *Al Jamal*. Their role was fundamental in the creation of a new social and political consciousness, especially within the different religious communities in the country.

The Constitutional Movement, which was promoted by a liberal and democratic programme, showed an egalitarian approach, especially concerning the ethnic and religious minorities of the country. Sayyid Jamal al-Din Va'iz Esfahani, a journalist for the newspaper *Al Jamal* and founder of constitutionalist movement in Esfahan, went to the Jewish neighbourhood in Tehran during the revolution and

made a speech in Hadash Synagogue¹. He stated: «As a result of this revolution, the Jews will enjoy the merits of freedom».² Moreover, the Constitutional movement showed, for the first time in Iran, an increase in the women's political participation. Their active role has been essential in rising new demands on the role of women in the society. The Movement became an open space for women to raise new questions, especially regarding their equal rights. It created a new opportunity for the political and social participation of women and paved the way for the construction of a new woman's social movement in the country. For instance, the Jewish women of Tehran, especially those from the upper class³, were the first to be formally educated⁴: this meant that they were also socially active in that period, as integral part of a woman's movement which was registered mainly in urban areas.

For the first time, also formally, Jews became equal to Muslim compatriots. In this regard, one of the most important changes concerning this new approach to minorities was the formation of a new National Assembly, where some seats were destined to the three major religious communities in the country. Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians could send their representatives in the second Majlis (1909–1911). The Jews, who had been officially recognized on a national level, had the possibility to break the chain of their exclusion within the Iranian society and this important episode marked the beginning of an 'Age of Jewish Enlightenment'⁵ in Iran.

The new Constitution, containing 51 Articles, was first promulgated during the reign of the late Shahinshah of blessed memory, Muzaffaru'd-Din Shah and ratified by him in 1324, according to the Persian Calendar (December 30, 1906). More supplementary articles were ratified by Shah, Muhammad 'Ali on 1325 (October 7, 1907). In general, the articles were influenced by new constitutional themes, enriched by the rise of nationalism all over the world, by the political and social evolutions in Europe and by the Revolution of the Young Turks. Furthermore, the new Constitution was inspired by new principles, like equality for all citizens and democracy. For example, article 2 of part 1 contains explicit reference to the whole Iranians, without any distinction, specifying that the National Assembly represents the «entire population of the country» (*qātebe-ye ahāli-e mamlekat*). The same statement is shown by article 8 (part 2), which states that «all the Iranian shall enjoy *motasāvi-ye olhoquq*» (equal rights) and by Article 9 (part 2) which specifies that all the individuals must be *mahfuz* (protected) and *masun* (safeguarded). Moreover, regarding taxation, Art. 98 affirms that there is no distinction between citizens.

Only Article 58 seems to be in contrast with the previous articles, since it provides that any position as State Official can be held only by a *mosalmān* (*Muslim*), *irāni-e olāsl* (Iranian-born) and *tab'e-ye irān* (Iranian citizen). This article, although it shows a clear mark of inequality inside the Iranian society, cannot overshadow the importance of the Constitutional Movement in the history

¹ According to the inscriptions available in the synagogue, it was constructed in 1645 A.M in the Oudlajan quarter. Hadash synagogue is one of the three synagogues active in Oudlajan today.

² Habib Levy, *Tārik-e yahud-e Irān* (Tehran: Kitābforūshī-i Yahūdā Brūkhīm, 1960), p. 830.

³ Namely women who had their family working in the government sectors.

⁴ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth - Century Iran*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 32.

⁵ David Menashri, "The Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic revolution" in *Esther's Children: a Portrait of Iranian Jews*, ed., Houman Sarshar, (Beverly Hills, Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002), p. 381-402, esp. 385.

of the Iranian Jews, especially for its essential role in shaping the future framework of the Jewish political and social activism in the country.

The last few years of the 1920s have been characterized by economic tensions related to World War I and the consequent Great Famine that raged between 1918-1919. This situation also involved the Jews of Tehran: indeed, the Great Famine had dangerous consequences especially in the health situation of the Jewish quarter. Moreover, these years marked the advent of the Zionism movement in Iran, which was allegedly exacerbated by the difficult economic situation of the country. The Balfour Declaration (1917), which promised a national home for the Jewish people, and later the mandate over Palestine (assigned to Britain in April 1920), started the spread of Zionism all over the world, also affecting Iran. The mandate was based on Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations of 28 June 1919, affirming «the principle that the well-being and development of these peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation and that securities for the performance, trust should be embodied in this Covenant» should be applied to Palestine. The Persian State, although it was not a founding member of the League of Nations, was invited to accede to the Covenant. For the first time, the Iranian State was an active part of the international community and was emerging from its isolation.

The favourable international situation led to the foundation of different Zionist associations in Iran, like the *Sefat 'ever* (which later became the *Anjoman-e sahionist-e irān*) and the *Hevrat Israel* (which was recalled *Va'ad ha-qehilah*)⁶; by September 1922 more than 27 branches of different Zionist associations were opened all over Iran.⁷ Other international associations, like the American Jewish Distribution Committee, started cooperating with the Iranian State. In 1918 the *Anjoman-e farhangi-e javānān-e yahudi-ye Tehrān* (a Cultural Association for Young Jews of Tehran) was established, with the aim of teaching Hebrew to young Tehrani Jews. The spread of the Hebrew language in Iran was one of the most important objectives of these associations, which aimed at the unification of the Jews all over the world. With the same purpose, in 1918, Shelemo Kohan-Sedgh, head of the *Anjoman-e taqowiyat-e zabān-e 'ebri* (Association for strengthening the Hebrew language), edited a Hebrew grammar book called *Sefer hizuqey sfat 'ever* (A book for strengthening the Hebrew language).⁸

The message of Zionism had its effect especially on the low-income Iranian Jewish class, which started a slight emigration to Palestine, attracted by the idea of a new life. The Zionist movement was coordinated in Iran by various international associations and spread out of the central point of Tehran mainly by the Redemption newspaper (*Ha-ge'ulah*). As specified by Lior Sternfeld, at a broad level, the Iranian Jews did not give a huge response to Zionism. He argues that only a small proportion of those who decided to emigrate to then Israel chose to «fulfil Zionist aspirations»⁹. This probably for their unconditional loyalty to Iran, their motherland. In this regard, also Haggai Ram argues that the Jews «who were integrated into the surrounding Iranian society, economy and culture- were not eager to emigrate»¹⁰ from Iran. Indeed, the history of Iranian Jews all over the

⁶ Menashri, "The Pahlavi Monarchy", p. 385.

⁷ Houman Sarshar, *Jewish Communities of Iran: Entries on Judeo-Persian Communities*, (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2011), p. 58.

⁸ David Yeroushalmi, "Judeo-Persian Literature", in *Esther's Children; a Portrait of Iranian Jews*, ed. Houman Sarshar, (Beverly Hills, Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002): 381-402.

⁹ Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 65.

¹⁰ Ram, Haggai. "Between Homeland and Exile: Iranian Jewry in Zionist/Israeli Political Thought." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 1 (2008): 1-20, esp. 2.

centuries was always characterized by a strong identification with the Iranian land: as Amirpur argues, this identification is due to the fact that the majority of Iranian Jews do not feel that they live in a diaspora. Indeed, the Jewish community has always felt part of the Iranian culture and society. To this extent, as she points out, also the Jewish faith has become a «domestic religion in the country».¹¹

In 1921, the tensions and disorders occurred in Palestine between the Jewish immigrants and the Palestinian residents, forced the Iranian central government to ban immigration there.

The Constitutional Revolution and all the changes occurred in Iran led also to the formation of a new and deeper national consciousness, influenced by the elevation of the National State as a core of a new socio and political system in the country. Nonetheless, it is in the very early stages of the twentieth century, that we can identify the birth of a modern notion of national identity, constructed on the basis of the modern nation state which emerged among Iranian intelligentsia: for the first time, the Western elements of sovereign state and national sovereignty entered the political debate of the country. Indeed, the slogan of many constitutionalists, which also inspired the formation of the new Constitutions, was «the six-thousand old nation» which was build and emphasized by a «romantic notion of Iran»¹². This new approach had an immediate consequence on the religious communities of Iran, and also on the Jewish ones: a notable improvement of their conditions, especially for what concerned their daily lives and their social participations. Moreover, the *Enqelāb-e Mashruteh* played an essential role in shaping the future framework of Jewish political and social activism in Iran. Indeed, in that period, the first Jewish newspaper in the country, called *Shalom*, was published.

For the emerge of a strong national sentiment in that period it is common to restrict the concept of the Iranian national identity to the modernist perspective, using static concepts and notions which only belong to recent decades. The artificiality of the concept that seems to emerge from such a perspective denies one of the founding aspects of national identity: its progressive character. The construction of national identity is, indeed, a long historical process, based on a continuity of epochs and traditions and the product of social, mythical, and symbolic processes, which cannot be reduced to the arbitrary restrictions of the modernist perspective. In this regard, there is no doubt that the Iranian identity has existed, as a sentiment, well before the nationalistic movements and before the construction, in the twentieth century, of the so-called Iranian national identity - *huwaiat-e melli*. It was in the previous centuries, during the development of the Achaemenid Empire in the Iranian soil, that the first manifestation of an embryonal 'national' sentiment of an Iranian identity emerged. In the very early years of the century, a modern notion of national identity was born. This new notion, which was constructed on the basis of the modern national state, emerged among Iranian intelligentsia.

The birth of the National State and the provisions set by the new Constitution, which were related to the entire population of the country, had a unifying effect on the Iranian society: for example, the European concept of nationhood was, for the first time, perceived also in the Iranian context.

¹¹ Katajun Amirpur, "Iran's policy towards Jewish Iranians and the state of Israel. Is the present Iranian state Islamofascist?", *Die Welt Des Islams* 52, no. 3/4, (2012): 370–399, esp. 384.

¹² Ahmad Ashraf, "The crisis of national and ethnic identities in contemporary Iran", *Iranian studies* 26, no. 1/2 (Winter/Spring 1993): 159-164, esp. 160.

The Constitutional movement paved the way for the construction of a National State that was related to the belonging to the nation (citizenship) and to a definition of the State as the expression of popular.

The effect of these new sets of values on the population, and especially on the Jewish communities in Iran, would be seen with the rise in power of Reza Shah Pahlavi. The new national state promoted a unitary society, which was enclosed in the sentiment of *Iranianness* (belonging to an Iranian nation). The sentiment of belonging to Iran will be mostly emphasized, as I will analyse in the next chapter, by the socio and cultural policy of Reza Shah's son, Mohamad Reza Shah.

1.1.2 *The advent of Reza Shah and his nationalistic policy*

The active role of the State as engine of social reforms in the country was fully achieved with the advent of Reza Shah Pahlavi, a military officer who came to power in 1925, after the dissolution of the Qajar dynasty. Reza Shah, called Reza Shah the Great after his death, was the penultimate Shah of Persia and the first of the Pahlavi dynasty. The Shah, when he was still only a high-ranking soldier in 1921, had organized a military coup. In that period, he was fighting in the ranks of the Cossack Brigade, the only modern unit of the Persian army that was created by the Russians at the time of the Tsars. On 12 December 1925, a new era began for Persia: Reza Shah was proclaimed king and on 25 April 1926, he placed the Iranian imperial crown on his head. At the same time, his son Mohammad Reza was proclaimed Crown Prince. In 1935 he changed the official name of the country from Persia to Iran.

His assumption to power had also the approval of the Representative of the Iranian Jews, in the person of Shemouel Haim, who also attended the coronation ceremony of the Shah in 1926. Haim, who will have a central role in the history of the Jews, had been elected, with more than eighty percent of consensus, in the Fifth Iranian Parliament on 22 of *Bahman* 1302 of the Persian Calendar (winter 1924) and he held his seat until *Ordibehesht* 1304 (spring of 1925). Shemouel Haim was confident in the work of the Parliament as the «institution of hope»¹³ and in the figure of Reza Shah, from whom he thought to find an alley for the cause of the Jews in the country. For this reason, he started putting all his efforts to achieve his mission: the full integration of the Jews into the Iranian society and the active participation of the Jewish communities in the political life of Iran. In order to achieve his aims, he knew that it would have been necessary to develop a national consciousness within the Iranian Jews. For that reason, he established different Jewish organizations and then published the *E-Haim*, a newspaper which was partly written in Hebrew. He also obtained the presidency of the Tehran Jewish Association.

The advent of Reza Shah inaugurated the rise of a new political dimension in the country, namely a centralized State. The Shah was capable to give a strong response to the demands of the Iranian people for what concerned the economic situation, social problems, and international power of the country. Moreover, with a strong centralized and nationalistic policy Reza Shah was able to give stability to the country. The new policy inaugurated by the Shah required the creation of a new national State, which was formed on the model of the new modern and progressive

¹³ “Jewish Representatives to the Parliament: Samuel Haim”, *7dorim.com*. Available at: <https://www.7dorim.com/en/jewish-representatives-to-the-parliament/samuel-haim/>. (Accessed on 10 January 2022).

nation States in Europe. These new Western models were «a unified nation, a single language and religion, the secularization of society and national sovereignty, technological progress, economic development, and the emancipation of women».¹⁴ The achievement of the State sovereignty which was, one of the main goals of Reza Shah reign, meant the complete independence of Iran from the political manipulation of Westerns countries, that had characterized the last decades of the Qajar era. This also included the ban of different organizations or any other movement which took inspiration from a foreign influence: for that reason, any communist and Zionist activity was considered outlaw. He also banned the emigration to Palestine, trying to cut any connection between the European Jews and the Iranians. His purpose was to create a new Iran based on territorial unity and nationalism.

The Shah's policy towards these foreign organizations and ideologies was only one of the reasons of the losing of appeal of Zionism in Iran. Another reason was the tensions between the two main Jewish leaders of that period, Shamuel Haim and his opponent at the election of the Fifth Parliament, Dr. Loghman Nehoray, one of the founders of the Zionist organization in Iran in 1918. Haim's vision of Zionism was in contrast with the other Jewish leaders: he considered Zionism a good idea for the European Jews who were claiming a country but could be a distraction for the Iranian Jews. Indeed, in his vision, the Iranian Jews had to fight for their freedom and rights in Iran, their motherland, and not follow any Messianic dream.¹⁵ Haim, a charismatic and controversial figure, wanted to be the voice of the political mission of the Jews in Iran, «waiting for a chance to kindle a light in the minds of his fellow Jews, and to guide them in a movement to free themselves from inequalities, humiliations and miseries»¹⁶. With the strong support of different international organizations, he also complained to the League of Nations in Geneva regarding the dramatic situation of oppression which the Jews faced in Iran.¹⁷ This action severed the relationship between Shamuel Haim and the Iranian authorities.

The redefinition of the central role of the State in the political and social sphere was conducted also through a systematic crackdown of any antagonism and rebellions by the Shah. The reinforce of his coercive and authoritarian approach, which would characterize Reza Shah's regime until the dissolution of his power in 1941, needed the creation of a strong military and police force. The creation of a national army, which became the most powerful institution in the country, is as a symbol of his power. For the monarch, the progress and modernity of the country passed through a policy of repression of all the diversities, in the name of a national unification which covered different aspects, from the political to the cultural sphere. In this regard, he wrestled against any movement of dissent that could undermine his national project and the stability of his power: in September 1926 he ordered the arrest of the Jewish leader Shamuel Haim, who was accused to have radical ideas and to be a conspirator against the authority of the Shah. After several years in prison, he was executed on the 10 *Azar*, 1310 of the Persian Calendar, the 15

¹⁴ Paidar, *Women and the Political*, p. 81-82.

¹⁵ Between Iran and Zion, Lecture by Lior B. Sternfeld. December 12th, 2019, The Turban Times and NASIM.

¹⁶ "Jewish Representatives to the Parliament: Samuel Haim", 7dorim.com. Available at: <https://www.7dorim.com/en/jewish-representatives-to-the-parliament/samuel-haim/>. (Accessed on 10 January 2022).

¹⁷ Amnon Netzer, Shemuel Haim, In *Jewish Communities of Iran: Entries on Judeo Persian Communities*, ed. Houman Sarshar, (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2011), p. 406-409, esp. 407.

December of 1931. That same day, the daily newspaper *Ettela'at* announced his assassination as follows: «Haim, who was elected to the Fifth Parliament as the Representative of the Jews, and who spent time in prison for collaborating with the secret committee, was executed today morning at Bagh-Shah»¹⁸.

Following these aspects related to the role of the State in this new era of Iran, the policy of Reza Shah intervened also in the promotion of a strong collective identity, which had existed even before the rise of nationalist movements in the country. Reza Shah exacerbated the importance for the newly founded state of a strong Iranian national identity, functional to the creation of a historical and national consciousness. This identity, which ties the notion of Iran to a «specific territory, a specific sense of self and a knowledge of former greatness»¹⁹, shaped the basis for a strong nationalism which was created by treating the nation as a community.²⁰ The Shah was promoting uniformity in a country which had been always characterized by a multicultural face, trying to crystallize and condense the Iranian identity in a collective cultural dimension and in a romantic notion of sense of belonging to Iran. In this respect, the demarcation of Iranian boundaries, land and borders in a country made on differences became the only criteria of the Iranian nationality.

Reza Shah's «conservative notion»²¹ of the Iranian national identity glorified several millennia of Persian history, since the rise of the Achaemenid Empire, and was shaped on a mythical image of the Iranian monarchy of the past. The historical memories of the past were mostly consecrated in literature: the *Shahnameh*, for instance, was full of references to Iran, Iranians, and the Iranian land. Moreover, in 1930s some historical findings suggested that the Achaemenid Empire was the first manifestation of the national and political identity.²²

Reza Shah was able to legitimize his role by combining the traditional institutions of the monarchy with a more modern approach to nationalism, that can be defined as secular, emphasizing the formation of a «modern civil society, citizenship, and a democratic policy».²³

His new national project based on the construction of an identity, with a light on the Iranian heritage rather than religion, also imposed a new approach on the various Iranian minorities, which have been part of the country for centuries. This new approach also required the removal of all the discriminatory laws against the Jews. The Iranian Jews were fully integrated in the national project and in the idea of an unitarian Iranian identity: for the first time, they could perceive themselves as equal citizens of Iran also from a legal perspective. Actually, as argued by Sarshar, this approach toward the Jews was not motivated by a real positive attitude towards the other religious minorities of the country²⁴, but was a necessary step that was

¹⁸ “Jewish Representatives to the Parliament: Samuel Haim”, 7dorim.com. Available at: <https://www.7dorim.com/en/jewish-representatives-to-the-parliament/samuel-haim/>. (Accessed on 3 December 2021).

¹⁹ Saleh Alam and James Worrall, “Between Darius and Khomeini: Exploring Iran's National Identity Problematique”, *National Identities* 17, no. 1 (2015), 73-97, esp. 74.

²⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 40.

²¹ Ahmad Ashraf, “The crisis of national and ethnic identities in contemporary Iran”, *Iranian studies*, Vol. 26 n. 1/2 (Winter/Spring 1993), 159-164, esp. 161.

²² Ivi, 161.

²³ Ashraf, “The crisis of national”, p. 161.

²⁴ Houman Sarshar, *Jewish Communities of Iran: Entries on Judeo-Persian Communities*, (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2011), p. 60.

functional to his national project. Anyway, without any doubt, the Reza Shah regime played an important role in enforcing the rights of the Iranian Jews. The Jews, who were recognized as equal citizens, could serve in the national army and could be enrolled in state school²⁵. Moreover, for the first time, they could hold government jobs and get government licenses to open shops in the bazars. This prompted many Jews to open their shops in new commercial areas of the biggest cities of Iran, especially Tehran, and this favoured the emigration of some Tehrani Jews from the Jewish neighbourhood, Oudlajān, to the northern areas of the capital, albeit still in a small number. This emigration would be one of the greatest phenomena of the following decades.

In general, the effects of his policy were only partly seen at that time, but they would be strongly perceived especially in the future era of the Pahlavi dynasty, with the advent of Mohamad Reza.

1.1.3 The decline of Reza Shah and the Second world war.

The process of building the new state for Reza Shah involved the transformation of the constitutionalists' idealism for the social progress into a political realism.²⁶ Reza Shah had fulfilled the demand of the Iranians for a strong executive power, while guiding the country toward the construction of a modern state. Nonetheless, the monarch failed in maintaining the centrality of the executive, especially far from foreign influences. First of all, the Iranian economy was still strongly dependent on the British, who still had the control of the majority of the Anglo Iranian Oil Company. The company had been founded in 1908 following the discovery of a vast oil field near *Masjed-e Soleimān* in the region of Khuzestan and it was the first oil company in the Middle East. In 1901, the British Empire had negotiated the first oil concession, called the D'Arcy Concession, with the Shah of Persia Mozaffar Al Din Shah, which sanctioned the complete control of the British on Persian oil reserves. The D'Arcy Oil Concession was revoked on November 27, 1932 and renegotiated in 1933 by the monarch Reza Shah after a long and difficult negotiation: this new agreement granted the British Empire complete control over the Iranian oil fields.

Moreover, Reza Shah proved to be not far from foreign ideological influence: this approach would be cultivated through the appropriation of various Western patterns adapted to Iran and functional to his power. Cottam states that during Reza Shah's reign:

All Iranian cities were forcibly westernized, and many of the traditional items of dress were eliminated, including the veils of women. His reign did a great deal to unify and stabilize Iran, but as was true with Ataturk, his solutions were too often superficial. The West was industrialized; so, Iran had to be industrialized. There was little rationality in the process²⁷.

On the eve of the Second World War Reza Shah gave an impetus on the edification of an Iranian identity based on the ideology of a great past, which looked back to the ancient Iran, emphasizing, more than before, the Iranian pre-Islamic heritage.

²⁵ As we will analyse later, at the same time many Jewish and other religious schools were closed.

²⁶ Paidar, *Women and the Political*, 118

²⁷ Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964), p. 12.

This Pahlavi «coercive approach to the construction of national identity»²⁸ was limiting the notion of the Iranian identity to a specific historical period of the country. This was built upon the idea of distinguishing themselves from a «perceived backward Islamic and African societies by aligning Iranian culture and history with the West»²⁹. This approach, which Reza Zia-Ebrahimi defines as «dislocative nationalism»³⁰, was constructed by marking a deep opposition between the Iranians and the Arabs and Islam, reinforcing the idea that the Arabs' conquest of the country was a «negative event which brought cultural and political decline»³¹. This new dimension of the Iranian identity, which was constructed in favour of a dynamic nationalism with the exclusion of part of the country's history, was strongly linked to the ideology of Nazism and to the idea of the supremacy of one race, in favour of the so-called «Aryan hypothesis»³². In both cases the new national identity was erected through a strategy of differentiation and exclusion of others, which could find its way of existence in a struggle between the self and the others.³³ In this context, also the Iranians of Jews heritage were not considered Iranians from an ethnic point of view: this ideology of exclusion culminated in stronger relation between Reza Shah and the Nazi State, which was reinforced by the fact of sharing a common Aryan origin.³⁴

This newly founded ideology and this strong approach with Hitler also defined the course of the events of the Iranian State from an international perspective and the alignment during the Second World War. In June 1941, Germany breached the Molotov Ribbentrop Pact of nonaggression, invading the Soviet Union through the so-called Operation Barbarossa. Iran's government did not oppose the German army's invasion and the consequent defeat of the Soviets. As stated by Reza Sha's finance minister, Abbasgholi Golshayan, this event was perceived in Iran as a good omen (*fāl-e nik*)³⁵. Furthermore, Germany and Iran had made several economic agreements in those years: estimates suggest that, in 1939, forty-one percent of the Iranian export was destined to Germany. Moreover, the alliance with Germany gave a great input to Iran's infrastructures, like the construction of a modern railroad. In addition, in Iran there were about 2000 agents of the German government.

The close alliance between Iran and Germany had not been considered a danger by the allies, especially for Iran's formal neutrality in the war. In the 1940s the Allies started to get worried about Reza Shah's sympathies for Germany. They feared that the German State would acquire more and more leads into the most important Iranian strategic points, those over which the Soviets, but above all the British, had had full control: the oil fields. The Allies began to understand the need of controlling the Iranian territory when the question of the corridor of American aid to the Soviet Union arose. The Persian corridor appeared to be the best route to

²⁸ Alam and Worrall, "Between Darius and Khomeini", p. 83.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 84.

³⁰ Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the "Aryan" Discourse in Iran, *Iranian Studies* 44, no- 4 (2011): 445-472.

³¹ Shahin Ayazi, *Identity Crisis: Persian Iranians versus Islamic Iranians leading to 1978 Social Movement in Iran*, in *ISA Annual Convention*, (ISA Annual Convention, Portland, 2003), p. 5.

³² Sarshar, *Jewish Communities*, p. 62.

³³ Ayazi, *Identity Crisis*, p. 7.

³⁴ Certainly, the alliance between Iran and Germany cannot reduce only to race. Indeed, there was also an economic and political aspect to it, since Germany seemed like a way out of the pressure by the British and Russia.

³⁵ Sarshar, *Jewish Communities*, p. 63.

reach the Soviet Union. In 1941 the British and the Soviets gave Reza Shah an ultimatum, demanding the Shah to leave his neutrality in the war. The 25 August 1941, after the King's refusal of the ultimatum, the British and the Soviets invaded the Iranian territories from two different fronts: the British from India and the Soviet Union from Azerbaijan. Iran was divided into two areas of influence, the northern part was under the control of the Soviets, while the south under the British. Only Tehran remained an enclave, a neutral territory. Moreover, the Western governors forced Reza Shah to abdicate and replaced him with his son Mohamad Reza Shah. The young Pahlavi immediately showed his support to the allies. On January 29, 1942, a tripartite treaty of alliance was stipulated, which established, above all, that the Anglo-Soviet troops were not military forces of occupation; while affirming Iranian independence, the treaty gave the Allies the opportunity to exploit the Persian corridor during the war years. In addition, the British and the Soviets assured that they would leave Iran within six months after the end of the war. With this treaty, Mohamad Reza Shah broke completely with his father's policy, who had been considered convincingly anti-British. The effect of the treaty was immediately seen in Iran. Tehran, in particular, had been the core of a specific episode of the war that the chronicles remember as the story of the "Tehran children" (*Farzandān-e Tehrān*): the name refers to a group of Polish refugees who had managed to escape the Nazi occupation in Poland and had settled in Tehran before leaving for Land of Israel - Mandatory Palestine. They arrived in *Bandar-e Pahlavi* (now called *Bandar-e Anzali*) and then some of them were relocated in Tehran. In her memoir Irena Beaupré-Stankiewicz recalls that moment as follow:

The port of Pahlavi was an oasis; it was happiness. That same pitiless sun was not so terrible, because there was the sea and palm-leaf mats supported on poles, which gave us shade³⁶.

Among those refugees there were around 1000 children, most of them orphans. The children ranged from one to eighteen years, although most were age seven to twelve.³⁷ The children arrived in the capital with a group of other 11.000 Polish citizens, who had to form a military troop to help the British Army.³⁸ They were transported mainly by bus. Tadeusz Piotrowski reports this memory:

As we traveled by bus from Pahlevi to Tehran I thought that we were passing through the most beautiful place in the world. This must have been the Garden of Eden.³⁹

Once in Tehran the children were settled in a camp of tents, located on Dustan Tappeh, a former military barrack of the Iranian Air Force outside the capital: the camp was recalled the «Tehran Home for Jewish Children»⁴⁰. The refugees started

³⁶ Irena Beaupré-Stankiewicz, Danuta Waszczuk-Kamieniecka, and Jadwiga Lewicka-Howells *Through Desert and Over Sea, in Isfahan: City of Polish Children*, (Sussex, Association of Former Pupils of Polish Schools, 1989), p. 63.

³⁷ "Tehran Children", United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington. Available at: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/tehran-children>. (Accessed on 8 July 2021).

³⁸ Mikhal Dekel, *Tehran Children: A Holocaust Refugee Odyssey*, (Norton: WW Norton & Co., 2019), 307.

³⁹ Tadeusz Piotrowski, *The Polish Deportees of World War II: Recollections of Removal to the Soviet Union and Dispersal throughout the World*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), p. 101.

⁴⁰ Dekel, *Tehran Children*, p. 308.

their daily life in Tehran, creating a community that was able to flourish, especially from a cultural point of view. Sternfeld argues that the refugees had a «tremendous impact on urban life in wartime Iran»⁴¹, opening theatre and different cultural associations. On April 30, 1942 different Iranian newspapers announced the opening of a new show with Polish artists. For example, Ettela'at, the most famous Iranian newspaper, wrote:

A Polish minister and the commander of the Polish forces in Iran will be in attendance, and the public is invited.⁴²

Ryszard Antolak in his article for the ParsTimes stated:

Something more than food and clothing are necessary for the human spirit to survive and grow. Art and Culture are antibodies to feelings of despondency and decay, and within a few months of their arrival, the exiles had set up their own theatres, art galleries, study circles, and radio stations all over the city. Artists and craftsmen began to give exhibitions. Polish newspapers began to spring up; and restaurants began to display Polish flags on the streets. Among the organizations formed to care for the educational and cultural needs of the exiles was the influential Institute of Iranian Studies begun by a small group of Polish academicians. In three years from 1943 to 1945 this group published three scholarly volumes and scores of other articles on Polish Iranian affairs.⁴³

Even though many Polish refugees managed to move to Palestine after the end of the war, some refugees died in Tehran and were buried in a small catholic cemetery located outside the capital, the *qobrestān-e kātolik-e lahestānihā-ye tehrān*. The cemetery accommodates around 1892 graves of Polish citizens, who died between 1942 and 1945. Every grave contains the Polish abbreviation 'S.P.' ('swiętej pamieci,' 'in memory of') the Latin abbreviation 'R.I.P.' ('requiescat in pace', 'may s/he rest in peace'). Around the graves two memorial stones stand, commemorating the story of the Polish refugees. In one stone, which reports an inscription in Polish, French and Persian, it is written:

To the Polish exiles who, on their return route to their homeland, found the peace of God. 1942-1944.⁴⁴

Another important event that marked the first years of the advent of Mohammad Reza has been the establishment of the State of Israel of which, in March 1950, the Iranian government gave a *de facto* recognition. Israel and the Iranian government were engaged in different common projects, like rebuilding the Iranian city of Qazvin after the earthquake in 1962. After the *enqelāb-e sefid* (1963) the relationship between Pahlavi and Israel strengthened, also through the creation of a regional coalition called the Alliance of the Periphery. The treaty was signed by the non-Arab countries of the Greater Middle East: Iran, Israel, Turkey, and Ethiopia.

⁴¹ Sternfeld, Poland Is Not Lost, p. 102.

⁴² Ettela'at, 10 Ordibehesht 1321 (Apr. 30, 1942), cited in Ivi, p. 112.

⁴³ Ryszard Antolak, Iran and the Polish Exodus from Russia 1942. ParsTimes. Accessed on 30 April 2020. Available at: http://www.parstimes.com/history/polish_refugees/exodus_russia.html

⁴⁴ My translation of the Persian inscription.

This coalition was based on the sharing of the same Western values despite their geographic location in the East.⁴⁵

The Iranian public opinion, with the support of the Muslim clerics, strongly opposed the creation of the State of Israel. Some Iranian intellectuals supported the creation of the State of Israel, following the idea of the compensation after the tragedy of the Holocaust. For example, Jalāl Āl-e-Ahmad, a famous writer, and a former militant of the Tudeh party (the Iranian communist party), showed his support to Israel writing a travelogue of the country: called *safar be vilāyet-e Isrā'il*, the report was published in a series of articles, in which he showed all his admiration for the newly founded State. After the Six-day war, this glorified image changed and many Iranian leftists and intellectuals started openly criticizing Israel, which was described as a «colonial power»⁴⁶. In the last chapter of his travelogue also Jalāl Āl-e-Ahmad started referring to Israel as «part of a western capitalist scheme».⁴⁷ He also changed the name of the travelogue from *safar be valāiet-e Esrā'il* (Journey to the State of Israel) to *safar be valāiet-e 'ezrā'il* (Journey to the State of 'Ezrā'il), where 'Ezrā'il refers to the Angel of Death in Islam and also in some Jewish traditions.

The Jews, especially in Tehran, were accused of supporting of the State of Israel and therefore attacked. In the bazaars of Tehran, a policy of boycotting Jewish traders also began.⁴⁸ Since his assumption to power, Mohamad Reza Shah had been in favour of the Zionist cause, which was, once again, free to operate in Iran. The Zionist movement opened a headquarter in Tehran to meet the needs of the Polish refugees. Some Jews embraced the movement, because felt the importance of the Zionist cause for those Jews who had fled from Nazism and needed a new land. At the same time many Jews joined the Tudeh for the struggle of an egalitarian society in Iran and outside the country.

After the establishment of the State of Israel, when the Zionism became a state-actor, the division between the Iranian Jews in support of the Zionism and those against it was stronger than ever. A quarter of the Jewish population migrated to Israel, while embracing Zionist identity and explicitly viewing Israel as their motherland. As argued by Amanat, the real reasons of this immigration that brought around 44,000 Iranian Jews to Israel from 1952 to 1979 was the economic situation rather than a real ideological one.⁴⁹ Anyway, most of the Iranian Jews never thought to leave Iran, their motherland, with which they felt deeply connected even more than before. In this regard, especially the Jewish youth did not engage with Zionism. The impact of Zionism in Iran was in general less strong than in other Middle Eastern countries. First of all, they did not support the political interpretation of Zionism, but they were only linked, especially at the beginning, to the idea of an «emotional com-spiritual attachment to Zion»⁵⁰, the Biblical name for Israel.

Secondly, Zionism was not perceived as the ideal solution for the Jews of Iran because of their domestic situation: they were becoming part of the Iranian society and they felt loyalty to their motherland. This was also due to the social improvement that were influenced by the second Pahlavi. Farideh Goldin states:

⁴⁵ Lior Sternfeld, "Pahlavi Iran and Zionism: An intellectual elite's short-lived love affair with the State of Israel", Ajam Media Collective (March, 2013).

⁴⁶ Sternfeld, "Pahlavi Iran and Zionism".

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 47.

⁴⁹ Abbas Amanat, *Identity among the Jews of Iran*, in *Iran Facing Others*, ed., Amanat A., Vejdani F. (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012), p. 219-242, esp. 226-227.

⁵⁰ Stendferd, *Pahlavi Iran and Zionism*.

If the Iranian economy and the condition of the Jews had not improved so rapidly during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, they would have left in mass⁵¹.

In that period, Iranian Jews started, more than ever, «to assume Iranian names, participating in Iranian festivity and national holidays and were drafted to the Iranian army»⁵² in large number. Menashri argues that «the Shah trusted the Jews to be loyal to Iran, to him and to his politics» because «he was the leader who continued in the path of Cyrus the Great»⁵³.

1.2 History of the Oudlājān quarter

Tehran is a relatively young town, especially when compared to other historical Iranian cities. Tehran became a city in 1533 when, under the supervision of the Shah Tahmasp I Safavid (1525-1576), who wanted to protect the village from Ottoman attacks, the small village of Tehran was surrounded by a wall of 114 towers and four gates.⁵⁴ In that period, Tehran was still a small centre that was affected by the importance of the historical city of Rey. Pietro Della Valle described Tehran in 1618 as a city that «possesse[d] nothing, not even a single building worthy of notice»⁵⁵.

Tehran started its domination over the whole Iranian empire during the Qajar era.⁵⁶ The king Agha Mohammad Khan (1794-1797) transformed the small village into the political centre of his monarchy, giving Tehran in 1786 the title of *pāitakht-e irān* (Iranian capital). The king, while transforming Tehran «as the imperial seat of his dynasty and also the seat of the caliphate»⁵⁷, put a great effort also in transforming the town into a commercial centre, with a vivid bazaar and a population which grew swiftly. This period was the start of what Mehan defines as the «creative destruction of Tehran»⁵⁸: the city, from a small village became an economic power which required a revolution also from an urban perspective.

Since the early Qajar era Tehran was composed by the typical urban components of all Persian cities. First of all, the town was divided in three residential neighbourhoods (Sangelaj, Oudlājān, Chalemaydan), showing special distinctive characteristics, which marked ethnicity and religion of the different inhabitants. In addition, the town had a citadel, with the centre point on *meydun-e arg*, a Friday Mosque and a *bāzār*, which served as «the spinal core of the urban

⁵¹ Farideh Goldin, *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman*. (London: Brandeis University Press, 2003), p. 41.

⁵² Tsadik, *Identity among the Jews of Iran*, p. 230.

⁵³ Menashri, «The Pahlavi Monarchy and the Islamic Revolution», p. 381-402, esp. 389. Cyrus has a long history as a saviour in the Jewish tradition. He is defined as God's anointed in Isaiah 45. His spirit is also discussed in Ezra 1 and appointed as the freeing of the Jews in the topic of Psalm 126.

⁵⁴ Talinn Grigor, «Tehran: A revolution in making», in *The Political Landscapes of Capitals*, ed. Jessica Christie and Jelena Bogdanovic, (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2015), p. 347-376, esp. 349.

⁵⁵ Quoted from Grigor, «Tehran: A Revolution in Making», p. 350.

⁵⁶ Leila Pourtavaf, *Interiority and the City Center: Locating the Gulistan Harem During Nasser al-Din Shah's Reign*, *Iran Namag* 2, no. 3 (Fall 2017).

⁵⁷ Talinn Grigor, *Tehran: A Revolution in Making*, 350.

⁵⁸ Asma Mehan *Tabula Rasa planning: creative destruction and building a new urban identity in Tehran*, *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 41, no. 3, (2017): 210-220, esp. 212.

layout»⁵⁹. The Qajar king Naser Al din Shah, after a visit to Europe, started comprehending the need to expand the city in order to cope with the increasing migration of population from rural areas of the country. It was at that time that Tehran started, for the first time, being a city of attraction: its population was only 15.000 inhabitants in 1620 and reached 50.000 people in 1800 and then 150.000 in the second half of nineteenth century.⁶⁰ For that reason, Naser Al din Shah ordered the destruction of the ancient city walls and the construction of new walls, in order to widen the old boundaries. In the same period, he also built a new district, called *dowlat* (government in Persian), because it had to serve as the political and administrative centre of the city. All these changes drastically transformed the old core of the town, changing the morphology of the city and also its appearance. As stated by Bradley-Birt, Tehran at that time presented «a perfect medley of things old and news, valuable and worthless without any order and management»⁶¹. This was the first manifestation of an incontrollable and incontrovertible rapid growth of Tehran and the destruction of the old core of the city.

In 1859, a group of students of the *Dār al-fanūn*⁶² institution designed the first map of Tehran at a scale of 1: 1000, under the supervision of Aligholi Mirza Etezaossaltaneh and the technical guidance of Monsieur Kershish, a German artillery instructor and an army brigadier general. In the map five quarters can be precisely identified: Oudlājān, Sangalaj, bazaar, Chalemeydān, *arg*. In addition, he also began to map all the aristocratic buildings and historical alleys of these neighbourhoods, giving us a precious historical document.

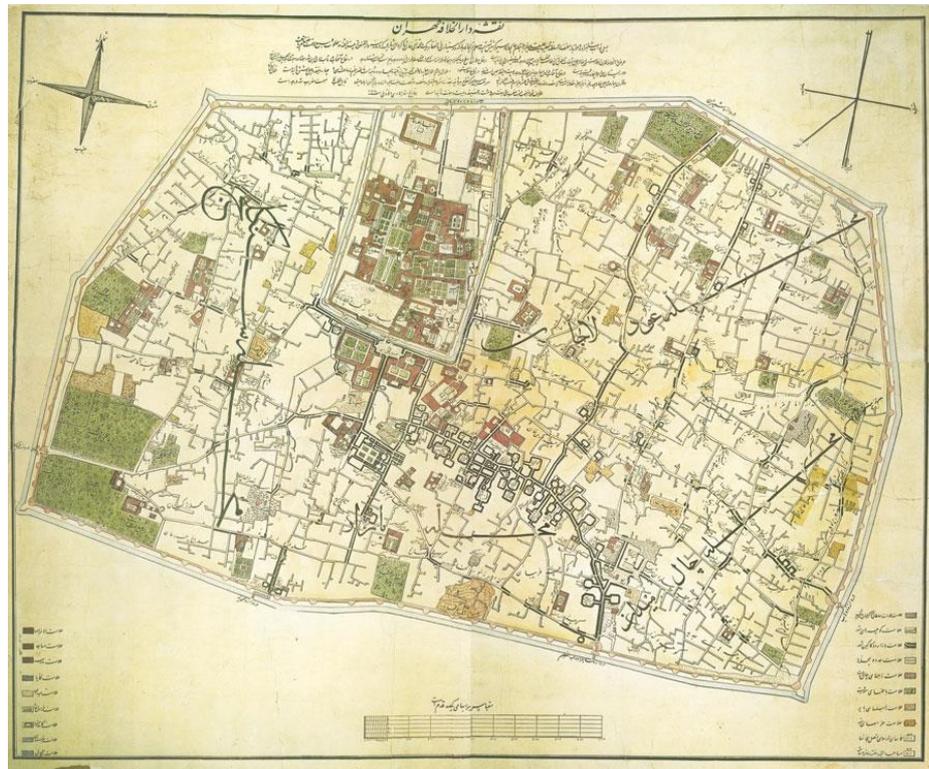
⁵⁹ Talinn Grigor, *Tehran: A Revolution in Making*, 350.

⁶⁰ Hooshang Amirahmadi and Ali Kiafar, “The transformation of Tehran from a garrison town to a primate city. A tale of rapid growth and uneven development”, in *Urban Development in the Muslim World*, ed. H. Amirahmadi (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 106-136, esp.112.

⁶¹ Francis Bradley Bradley-Birt, *Through Persia from the Gulf to the Caspian*, (Boston: J. B. Millet, 1910), 301.

⁶² *Dār al-fanūn* was the first Iranian modern institution of higher learning located in the city of Tehran. It was founded in 1851 by Amir Kabir, and it was conceived as a polytechnic to train upper-class Persian youth in medicine, engineering, military science, and geology. Later on, many parts of the institute were merged into the new Tehran University.

Figure1: 1887 Map of Tehran, by Abdul-Ghaffar (Source: Shahid Beheshti University, Faculty of Architecture Archive).



The old Tehran, as also found on the map, was composed by different historical quarters. The Oudlājān neighbourhood was one of the five quarters of the old city, located within the old city walls, on the margin of what is now the *bāzār-e bozorg* (grand bazaar), bounded on the south by *meydun-e Molavi*, on the north by *khiābān-e Amir Kabir* and *Sarcheshmeh*. On the west side the quarter was bounded by *Shams ol-Emāre*, while on its eastern side by *Emāmzāde-ye Yahy* which was, in the past, an integral part of the old Oudlājān neighbourhood. Most of the inhabitants of Oudlājān, until at least the sixties of the twentieth century, were Jews who arrived in Tehran from different areas of Iran.⁶³ The demographic situation of the quarter, starting from the late 1880s, was affected by the political and institutional situation of the capital, together with an economic growth that Tehran registered in the late century. This phenomenon of migration, which would reach its peak in the early 1900, brought a significant number of new inhabitants to Tehran. The southern part of the city, which at the time was the poorest and less urbanized of the whole capital, was strongly affected by this wave of migration. Many new migrants found in the old quarters in the south, especially in Oudlājān, their ideal space where to begin their new life. By the turn of the twentieth century Oudlājān became a multi-ethnic neighbourhood. The first Jewish immigrant families arrived in Tehran already in the late 1700. Tehrani Jews lived in this neighbourhood «since Tehran became the capital of Iran, 230 years ago!» states proudly Sari during our conversation. The

⁶³ Monica Mereu, “Oudlājān memories. The Iranian Jewish community of Tehran from a female perspective”, in *The Jewish Diaspora after 1945: A Study of Jewish Communities in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. S. Behnaz Hosseini (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 2-26.

large presence of Jews could be seen in the high number of Jewish religious buildings: indeed, in the neighbourhood, until at least the first half of the twentieth century, there were fourteen synagogues and only two mosques.

Another prominent aspect of Oudlājān was, since the beginning, the significant diversity of its Jewish community. Since Tehran was not an ancient city, the Jewish community, which originally settled in Oudlājān, had different origins, which all the respondents were able to trace. Recalling the story of their families, it meant for them, not forgetting their origins. Shamsi told me «It is always important to remember where you come from. But for us, as immigrant Iranian Jewish families it is necessary for our own survival»⁶⁴.

These Jewish inhabitants, who arrived in Tehran mostly for economic reasons, came from those Iranian cities that had been inhabited by Jews since ancient times, like the city of Shiraz, Isfahan, Kashan, Mashhad, or Hamadan. In this respect, it may be pointed out that the composition of Oudlājān reflected the variety, in terms of ethnicity, of the Jewish population of Iran: even though the majority were Persian, there were also Arab Jews and Kurds.⁶⁵ These people, who came also from different urban communities, have animated the neighbourhood with their many voices and their traditions, which over time have merged, creating a lively and culturally active neighbourhood.

The lack of historical and archival documentation makes it almost impossible to accurately determine the historicity and antiquity of Oudlājān, whose can be seen in historical texts and maps from the early Qajar era. The term Oudlājān literally means ‘the place for dividing the water’. The term probably originates from the townsfolk’s accent⁶⁶ of three different words. In this term, *Ou* might be the local pronunciation of the word water, *drājīn* means distribution and *ān* is a place suffix in Persian language.

Of the five historical districts that made up the city of Tehran in the past, Oudlājān was certainly the most important: it was, indeed, one of the biggest and liveliest neighbourhoods of the old town, with more than 2000 houses and 1100 shops. The great expansion of Tehran took place above all in the Nasserite period, in which it was inhabited by important noble families. In this regard, during the Qajar era, given its prominent position at the centre of the city, Oudlājān was probably considered as an aristocratic area of the capital.⁶⁷ In particular, it was

⁶⁴ Personal interview with Shamsi, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian,

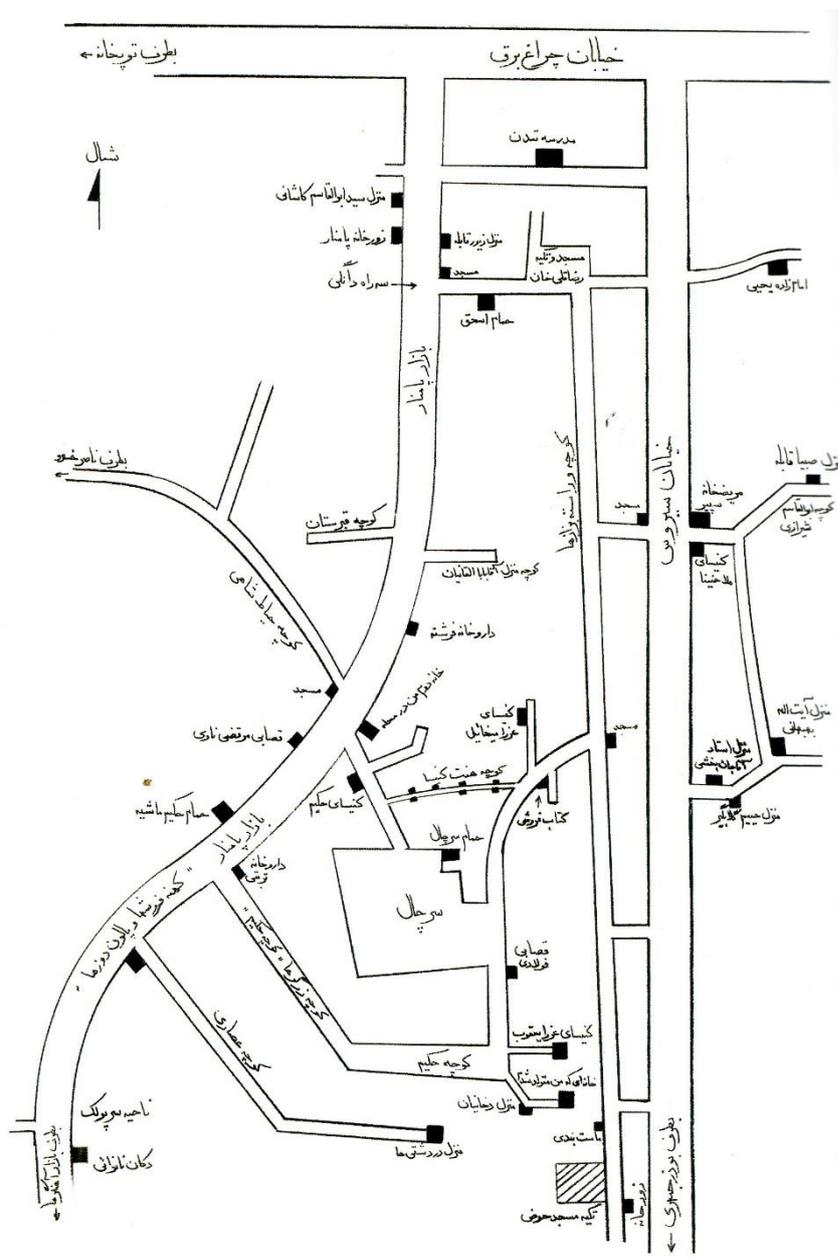
⁶⁵ During the twentieth century also Jews from outside the country arrived in Tehran, like Iraqi Jews and European Jews. The first wave of immigration of the Iraqi Jews was in 1914, when the community was forced to join the Ottoman army. Many of them refused, so they were forced to leave the country. Many of these refugees settled in Tehran, while many other moved to the Iranian city of Abadan. The second wave was in 1941, after the pogrom called Farhoud (violent dispossession), which took place against the Jewish population of Baghdad following the British victory in the Anglo-Iraqi War. In 1941, many Ashkenazi - Jews, even though in small numbers, also arrived in Iran. For an analysis on these waves of immigration in Iran see The Jewish Community in Iran from 1941 until the Revolution, Fred and Ellen Lewis/JDC Archives Fellowship (Lecture) and Lior Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth Century Iran*, (Stanford University Press, 2019).

⁶⁶ Before Persian became the common language of the Jewish communities of Iran, Iranian Jews spoke several variants of Judeo-Persian dialects. These languages were influenced by the local dialect of the city, with just few language loans from Hebrew and Aramaic. The few Hebrew terms include mainly religious words. In Tehran, facing the immigration of many Iranian Jews looking for a job, several Jewish dialects were spoken. All Jewish Iranian dialects are now extinct.

⁶⁷ The article “Az mahalleh-ye Oudlājān-e Tehrān, che midānid?”, Mashregh news (august 2016), refers to Oudlājān in the Qajar time as *manāteq-e e’iān-e neshin*, an aristocratic area. Available at: <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/610776/>. (Accessed on March 2021).

defined as the ‘garden of Tehran’ which housed several residential plots like as Ghavam Al-Dawlah, Nasir Al Dawlah badr, Kazemi e Seyyedhassin. There were also large gardens and sycamore trees (*chenār*), which many Jews remembered in their descriptions of the quarter. Oudlājān was divided into three different sectors: *Oudlājān sharqi* (the Eastern part), *Oudlājān gharbi* (the Western part), and *Oudlājān miāni* (the middle area), which was the Jewish part.⁶⁸ All this area was then divided into eight more small quarters. One of these was called Hayatshahi and it was one of the oldest areas of Oudlājān, which in Qajar era hosted various important and rich families.

Figure2: Drawing of the Oudlājān neighbourhood by Azizollah Banayan (Source: Shirazian 12).



⁶⁸ This division was referred by Yousef during our interview in Tehran, November 2019.

At the centre of the quarter (in the *Oudlājān miāni* part) there was a circular area known as Sarechāl⁶⁹, in which the majority of Jewish families lived. The name Sarechāl can be literally translated as head of the slum, probably referring to the garbage pit located in its midst.⁷⁰ In this regard, Yousef remembers:

Some families did not have a pit for the garbage in their homes, so they dumped their trash in the only pit that existed in the area⁷¹.

As stated by Habib Levy, in the Sarechāl-hole sometimes there was «so much trash that a hillock formed».⁷² According to another similar version, the word Sarechāl reminds to the hole located at the central square of the Oudlājān neighbourhood where rain and drainage of water flowed down the pit and into the well. Another version, also reported by Yousef, refers to the Chalemeydun neighbourhood, which was located at the very entrance of Sarechāl. Despite the different meanings in the derivation of the word, the name Sarechāl became, for the Jews living in Oudlājān, a symbol of their quarter, showing a deep connection to this specific area, which was, at the core of the twentieth century, the predominantly inhabited by Tehrani Jews. Indeed, Sarechāl is still today the term used more frequently by the Jews themselves to refer to their quarter.

Although the large number of the inhabitants were Jews, since the Qajar era, Oudlājān showed its multicultural face, hosting a great variety of religious buildings, which belonged to the most ancient religions of Iran. Synagogues, Shrines (*Arāmgāh*), Mosques and Churches overlooked the narrow streets of Oudlājān, as symbols of the old interactions of the neighbourhood. This «symbiosis» between different faiths has «roots in the intangible heritage which is still alive in the neighbourhood».⁷³

The story of the quarter in the twentieth century follows the political and social vicissitudes that had traced the history of contemporary Iran. In particular, Oudlājān ran into the destructive tempest of World War II, suffering of famine and poverty. Moreover, the economic and social consequences of the war had a strong impact on the health condition of the quarter. The increased levels of contamination, an utter lack of medical facilities, and widespread negligence of basic hygienic principles contributed to spreading various contagious diseases, in particular plague, cholera, sexually transmitted diseases, typhus, and typhoid. Moreover, the Jews all over the country were not allowed to use Muslims' baths, a ban which made hygienic conditions in the Jewish neighbourhood even more difficult. After the intervention of the Minister of Health, in order to overcome these poor

⁶⁹ In this work the terms *Oudlājān* and *Sarechāl* are used interchangeably.

⁷⁰ As often happened in the past, even in Oudlājān the names of the streets and areas of the neighbourhood were linked to the presence of religious buildings or of aristocratic families. Sometimes, like in this case, they were linked to geophysical or geomorphological characteristics of the ground. In fact, it was the daily life that gave shape to these places.

⁷¹ Personal interview with Yousef, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

⁷² Habib Levy, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran: The Outset of the Diaspora*. Abridged and edited from the Persian by Hooshang Ebrami, translated by George W. Maschke, (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers in association with the Cultural Foundation of Habib Levy 1999), 431.

⁷³ Susan Habib, Navid Jamali, Shaghayegh Shahhossein, "Please save Oudlājān as a museum without walls", ed. Riva Raffaella, *Ecomuseums and cultural landscapes. State of the art and future prospects*, (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli Editore, 2017), p. 106-115, esp. 107.

conditions, Jews were finally allowed to use public baths and to create their own ones.

The quarter lived the situation of the Tehran Children with more anxious and sadness and their arrival in the city was one of the most talked-about events of that period. Stanisława Jutrzenka-Trzebiatowska, a Polish refugee, remembered her arrival in Tehran as follow:

Our arrival in Tehran was full of surprises because it was Good Friday prior to Easter. All kinds of cakes, as well as hard-boiled eggs in great baskets had been brought in large quantities to both the enormous barracks and the air-force buildings. These had been vacated to us—homeless and hungry people. As we made our way through the streets of the town, the Persians threw bunches of flowers from balconies into the trucks, accentuating the friendly welcome. It was not surprising, therefore, that there were tears of emotions and joy, discreetly wiped away, in that pleasant, friendly atmosphere⁷⁴.

When children arrived in Tehran, they were in depreciable conditions due to the long voyage and malnutrition. They were located in a camp of tents, in the area of Dustan Tappeh, in the north of the Iranian capital. A lot of Tehrani Jews gave help to these suffering children, first of all collecting donations and buying clothes and food.⁷⁵ Many Jewish families of Oudlājān hosted them in their houses.⁷⁶ Stanisław Milewski recalled

I remember that we were warmly greeted by the Persian people with gifts of food, dates, and clothes. We were simply amazed by the sight of smiling people and a bustling city full of open shops and traffic.⁷⁷

After the establishment of the State of Israel, the strong Zionist propaganda had its effect also in Iran, especially for those Jewish communities who suffered of poverty and lack of jobs and opportunities. Therefore, the call of the Zionist movement arrived also to Tehran, where a small number of Jewish families decided to migrate to Israel.

Moreover, Oudlājān, from the 1950 to 1951, right after the establishment of the State of Israel, welcomed a large number of Jews from different provinces of Iran. They arrived in Tehran as a place of rest, before their migration to Israel. The number of Jews who arrived in Tehran reached its peak at the end of the 1950s: in that period, the problems of overpopulation of the Jewish quarter became evident.

In her memories Hoori Amram-Shaoul remembers this particularly period in the history of Iranian Jews and says:

The house of my family in Oudlājān had extra rooms that my dad would rent to Jewish families that come to Tehran from small towns; they would rent them for short time and then they would migrate to Israel.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Piotrowski, *The Polish Deportees of World War II*, p. 115.

⁷⁵ Levy, *Comprehensive History*, p. 544.

⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 545.

⁷⁷ Piotrowski, *The Polish Deportees*, p. 105.

⁷⁸ Eshagh Shaoul, "Its purpose, background, memories and hopes", Sarechal.com (December 2003). Available at <http://sarechal.com/NewMainPages/Purpose.html>. Accessed on: 10 January 2022).

1.3 The negative representation of the quarter

The vast majority of the Jewish people of Tehran used to live in Oudlājān and this gave them the possibility to grow up as a community. Oudlājān was, more than other Jewish quarters in Iran, «a local network creating a social space distinct from the public and the political centre of the capital»⁷⁹. The solidarity within the members of the community, from a social and economic point of view, was also enhanced by the fact of living in a Muslim dominant culture and society: indeed, the collaboration in the labour market for the men of Oudlājān was a way through which overcome the condition of minority in an economy that was entirely dominated by their Muslims compatriots; while for women, the cultivation of a strong sense of community between the other Jewish women of the quarter was a way to overcome their specific condition of minority in a male-dominated world and society. This specific condition of minority, together with the fact that Tehran did not have a historical Jewish community, determined the fact that Tehrani Jews were, at least until the end of the nineteenth century, less integrated into the Tehrani society.⁸⁰ In other big cities, like Shiraz, the Jews' activities and identity were «more rooted in the urban history»⁸¹, whereas in Tehran their political and social role was limited.⁸² The isolation was strongly appreciated and maintained by the Jewish inhabitants themselves also as a means of protection;⁸³ indeed, as stated by Eshagh Shaoul, «the Jews felt safer and more at home in Oudlājān than in the city at large»⁸⁴. Until the first half of the century, the Jewish social and political role in the capital was limited as well as their geographical visibility and their isolation, determined by all these factors, was more emotional because of their social exclusion.

From the 1930s onwards, when the city of Tehran began its urban expansion, the isolation of the community started depending also on the status of Oudlājān and its position, which was secluded in the south suburbs of the city. The spatial and economic marginality of the neighbourhood grew further with the expansion of Tehran in the twentieth century, which was developing northward. Therefore, although belonging to the central historical core of the old town, Oudlājān at the time became a border neighbourhood, located on the edge of the capital city of Tehran. Consequently, this spatial segregation of the quarter had determined the perception that people, living outside the neighbourhood, had about Oudlājān, which was seen and mostly described as a place of stigmatization. This process,

⁷⁹ Reza Bankar, *Driving Culture in Iran: Law and Society on the Roads of the Islamic Republic*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), p. 156.

⁸⁰ Avraham Cohen, "Iranian Jewry and the educational endeavours of the Alliance Israélite Universelle", *Jewish Social Studies* 48, no. 1 (1986), p. 15-44, esp. 16.

⁸¹ Bernard Hourcade, "Migrations and social mobility in greater Tehran: from ethnic coexistence to political divisions?", in *Human mobility and multi-ethnic coexistence in Middle Eastern Urban societies. Tehran Aleppo, Istanbul and Beirut* 102, ed. Kuroki Hidemitsu, (Research Institute for languages and cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Languages, 2015), p. 27-40, esp. 30.

⁸² Of course, there were several exceptions. Already in the Qajar era, many Jews of Teheran worked in the court as diplomats, doctors and physicians. From the first half of the twentieth century, the situation changed, and the Jews of Tehran started being employed in important position and integrated into the Iranian society.

⁸³ Anne-Sophie Vivier-Muresan, "Communitarian neighborhoods and religious minorities in Iran: A comparative analysis", *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 5 (December, 2007), p. 593-603, esp. 596.

⁸⁴ Eshagh Shaoul, "Its purpose, background, memories and hopes", Sarechal.com (December 2003). Available at <http://sarechal.com/NewMainPages/Purpose.html> (Accessed on: 12 December 2021)

which Cattedra defines as the «semantics of stigmatization»⁸⁵, invests above all the urban spaces on the margins, which have remained isolated and cut off, whether voluntarily or not, from the urban culture. Therefore, even though the ‘*mahalleh*’⁸⁶, as the place where the Jews decided to settle during their arrival in Tehran, did not originally had any specific negative connotation in itself, it was anyway perceived as the symbol of the long history of discrimination that the Jews faced in Iran especially after the advent of the Safavid. In this stigma and distorted perception of the neighbourhood, the description of Oudlājān that has been operated over time through various agents, is particularly important: such as health legislation, for improving the hygienic conditions of the neighbourhood, media, the government decrees, and the interventions of politicians. Moreover, various reports about the living conditions of the Iranian Jews in their historical quarters were provided by different Jewish leaders, both inside and outside the country. For instance, one of the main goals of Shemouel Samuel Haim, as an active Jewish member of the Iranian *Majles* (Parliament), was the improvement of the living conditions of the Jewish residents in Oudlājān, a place that «with its dissonant composition, was not worthy of the Jewish life».⁸⁷ In a public essay, he condemned the conditions of Oudlājān where the Jews were forced to live deprived of water, light and most of all decent hygienic conditions.⁸⁸ Through the use of a series of «de-qualifying attributes»⁸⁹ the neighbourhood has been described through images that have determined all its marginality, placing the accent on negative issues such as poverty, lack of hygiene and discrimination.

Israel Goldstin a well-known American rabbi and Zionist leader, who visited Iran in the late 1940s as vice-president of the World Jewish Congress, in his book *My World as a Jew*, described Oudlājān as follows:

The *mahalleh*, which had then about 7000 inhabitants, was in most respect similar to all such Jewish ghettos in the East, with open water troughs lining the alleyways and the obvious lack of any sewerage, although conditions were better than in the *mellahs* of Morocco which we had seen not long before. Tehran’s *mahalleh* had four families living off each courtyard, under which lay enclosed cell pools.⁹⁰

Moreover, in that period, the Oudlājān neighbourhood was on the focus of different reports from various Zionist organizations, which were operating in order to report the living conditions of the Jews in the Iranian Jewish quarters. For example, Albert Confino, who travelled to Iran several times on behalf of the central Alliance of France, argued that «there was nothing more pitiable, unhealthier, and dirtier than

⁸⁵ Raffaele Cattedra, “Le parole del territorio. Denominazione e controllo simbolico dei margini urbani come espressione di territorialità politica”, in *Territorialità: concetti, narrazioni, pratiche. Saggi per Angelo Turco*, ed. Claudio Arbore, Marco Maggioli (Franco Angeli, 2017), 275-293, esp. 276.

⁸⁶ The term ‘*mahalleh*’ derives from the Arab word ‘*mahalla*’, which means to settle, to occupy.

⁸⁷ 7dorim.com – Jewish representative to the Parliament. Accessed on 14 January 2021. <http://iranjewish.7dorim.com/220/Jewish%20Representatives%20to%20the%20Parliament/Samuel%20Haim>

⁸⁸ 7dorim.com – Jewish representative to the Parliament. Accessed on 14 January 2021.

⁸⁹ Cattedra, *Le parole del territorio*, 276.

⁹⁰ Israel Goldstein, *My world as a Jew: the memoirs of Israel Goldstein*, (New York: Herzl Press, 1984), 22.

Jewish neighbourhoods».⁹¹ Another example of this bias is given by the words of Hazel Greenwald, who, during his visit in 1958, wrote:

The Jews in Persia are still in the ghetto, but what a ghetto! We thought Morocco and Casablanca were bad, but this cannot compare in filth, despair, degradation and sickness and disease. They truly live-in mud holes. Tehran, I hear, is a better place to live in than the neighbouring villages where Jews have no opportunity even to peddle and live by their wits and mostly begging.⁹²

These descriptions contributed to the formation of a distorted image of Oudlājān that influenced the international public opinion. This partial perception and portrayal of the neighbourhood have also often negatively influenced many scholars who have described Oudlājān as a place of only discrimination, poverty, and guiltiness⁹³, forgetting something that is particularly important for our analysis: that the neighbourhood was, first of all, a lively space, a place of familiarity and memory. Therefore, this work intends to give voice to the various voices that still retain a genuine and truthful memory of the neighbourhood and that are able to represent and tell it with great dignity and value.

1.3.1 Various way of defining Oudlājān: language as a form of marginality.

During the interviews and analyses of the texts about Oudlājān I perceived how much a stigma is still widely present in the designation of the neighbourhood itself and in the terms used to refer to it. The language itself is, indeed, an instrument of marginality. In particular, I highlighted a stark contrast between the words employed by those speakers coming from outside the neighbourhood and terms used instead by the «interiors».⁹⁴ My analysis revealed the use of four terminological forms in the designation of the Jewish quarter of Tehran: ‘Oudlājān’ and ‘Sarechāl’ employed mostly by the dwellers of the quarter and ‘mahalleh’ and ‘ghetto’ used only by the outsiders.

The first form is the use of the Persian word Oudlājān which designates the neighbourhood in its complexity and therefore represents the term of greatest use also for merely historical reasons. Indeed, the term Oudlājān was the original name of the neighbourhood, as it appears from the Qajar documents that first mentioned that name. The second term is Sarechāl⁹⁵, which indicates the area of Oudlājān

⁹¹ Albert Confino, *Shiraz Travel Memoirs*, ed. Amnon Netzer ed Padiavand: *Judeo-Iranian and Jewish Studies Series 2*, (Los Angeles: Mazda Publication, 1996), 239.

⁹² From the Central Zionist Archive (CZA), file K11/2014, May 16, 1958; cited in David Menashri, *The Pahlavi Monarchy and the Islamic Revolution in Esther's Children; a Portrait of Iranian Jews*, ed. Houman Sarshar, (Beverly Hills, Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002), 381-402, esp. 391.

⁹³ Some scholars attribute the presence of ethnic and religious quarters in Iran to the advent of Shiism during the Safavid era and they see it as a consequence of a strict Shi'ite doctrine concerning non-Muslim citizens of Iran. In reality, this urban particularity had existed in Iran also during the Sassanid time having therefore a profound historical root prior to the rise of Islam in Iran (Vivier-Muresan, *Communitarian Neighborhoods*). Moreover, some scholars still define Oudlājān and all the other Jewish quarters of Iran as religious ghettos, a wrong term when used in its European connotation.

⁹⁴ Cattedra, *Le parole del territorio*, 277.

⁹⁵ At the centre of the quarter (in the *Oudlājān-e mioni part*) there was a circular area known as Sarechāl, literally translated as head of the slum, probably for the garbage pit located in its midst.

where there was the highest concentration of Jewish inhabitants. The term was, however, the most widely used among the interviewees who had a deep relationship with the neighbourhood. Actually, the connection between the quarter and the Jewish residents has always been so strong that the Jews of Tehran were, for many years, called *bacheh hā-ye Sarechāl*⁹⁶, ‘Sarechāl -children’. Most of the time, the term has been employed as a synonym of Oudlājān itself. Indeed, Mona recalls that the majority of the Jewish dwellers did not even know the term Oudlājān and used Sarechāl to refer to all the quarter. Only in one case, the interviewee made a distinction between Oudlājān and Sarechāl, describing the two places as separate and distinct entities: with Oudlājān he was referring to the quarter that «used to have a couple of mosques and a lot of houses of Muslim families»⁹⁷; while with Sarechāl he meant the Jewish quarter. Mohsen, who is now aware that the distinction between Oudlājān and Sarechāl had no historical veracity, proudly reiterated his belonging to Sarechāl, calling himself a ‘*Sarechāli*’. For him, the use of the term also has a profound affective value; he remembers: «I keep using this name because this was the one used by my parents and my grandparents, and it brings me back to their memory»⁹⁸.

I have also detected the frequent use of the term ‘*mahalleh*’ (sometimes in writings as ‘*Mahalleh*’⁹⁹). This term, which means ‘neighbourhood’ in modern Persian, has been used in place of the proper name of the quarter: the use of this term, which is widely spread also among scholars referring specifically to Oudlājān, has also been found in interviews with Tehrani Jews who have never inhabited the neighbourhood and who have never had any relationship with the Oudlājān dwellers. In modern Persian, the term ‘*mahalleh*’ has the neutral meaning of ‘neighbourhood’, while in the past the term used to describe an area of a city specifically related to a community «that was socially and spatially bound».¹⁰⁰ The «social spatiality» of Oudlājān was not defined by a «bounded physical geography or rigid place in the urban administrative system», but by a «cultural practice»¹⁰¹. Adopting the three major components of the neighbourhood which were discussed by Alkan and Maksudyan, we can understand the meaning of some terms related to Oudlājān. The first concept is related to the boundaries of the neighbourhoods that make them ‘identifiable’ from the rest of the city. These boundaries, like in the case of Oudlājān, can be not material, but emotional and sentimental. These boundaries are in any case «materialized in the bodies, in the language and in the everyday practices of neighbourhood dwellers and outsiders to make each and every neighbourhood knowable, recognisable, and identifiable»¹⁰². The second component is the narrative one and identifies the neighbourhood as a narrated and imagined entity, based on stories and memories. The third component, according to

⁹⁶ Haroun Yashayaei, *Ruzi ke esm-e khod rā dānestam*, (Tehran: Shahab Sagheb, 2017), p. 11.

⁹⁷ Personal online interview with Mohsen, December 2020.

⁹⁸ Mohsen, personal online interview, December 2020.

⁹⁹ Goldstin in his book uses the term ‘*Mahalleh*’ (with the capital letter M) to refer to the Jewish quarter of Tehran, not giving the specific historic name of the quarter, which was commonly known and used when he visited Oudlājān in 1940s.

¹⁰⁰ See: Reza Masoudi, *The rite of urban passage: the spatial ritualization of Iranian urban transformation*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 62.

¹⁰¹ Amy Mills, *Streets of Memory: Landscape, Tolerance, and National Identity in Istanbul*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 39.

¹⁰² Hilal Akan and Nizar Maksudyan, Introduction, in Hilal Akan and Nizar Maksudyan (eds.), *Urban Neighbourhood Formations: Boundaries, Narrations and Intimacies* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 2.

Alkan and Maksudyan, focuses on social relations within the neighbourhood dwellers who are defined as «social agents who turn a piece of urban settlement into a neighbourhood».¹⁰³

According to these categories, we can understand how Oudlājān represented a social unit made of people and stories, which were intertwined in the construction of a moral order and urban practices inside the neighbourhood space. Indeed, the Jews in Iran were never forced by law to live in a separate neighbourhood, but the concentration in a single quarter was the result of two different forces: first of all, it was the consequence of external pressure, especially because, until the advent of the Pahlavi dynasty, the Jews could not open shops and synagogues in quarters where the majority of the dwellers were Muslims; moreover it was the result of a personal feeling and a sense of solidarity with the other Jews, with whom they shared a «collective life-style».¹⁰⁴ Therefore, unlike the modern usage, the use of the term ‘*mahalleh*’ in the past had a disparaging connotation, which was given to these isolated areas distinguishable for a specific demographic concentration, in particular the religion or ethnicity of its inhabitants. During the interviews with some Tehrani Jews, I have noticed that the term ‘*mahalleh*’, with a negative connotation, is still employed by those Jews who have never lived in Oudlājān and never had contacts with the inhabitants of the quarter: they were the wealthy Jews of the north of Tehran and the use of the term ‘*mahalleh*’ was mainly the result of the emotional detachment that they had from the neighbourhood. From this perspective, in the interviews this term has never been used as the Persian term of the neutral ‘neighbourhood’, as in modern language; in reality, it has taken on a different meaning, representing what in the past was the ‘*mahalleh*’, namely an isolated space, markedly tied to a certain ethical and religious component that inhabited that particular space. Moreover, that use shows the perception that the majority of these Jews had about the quarter, which was seen as a place of poverty and isolation; similarly, it reveals their idea about the Jewish inhabitants of Oudlājān, who were perceived as a separate community, which was easily distinguished from the wealthy non-*mahalleh* inhabitants for different aspects. One of these, as pointed out by one of the respondents, was their specific strong accent, easily recognizable outside, which was a clear mark of their isolation.¹⁰⁵ Even though since the beginning of the twentieth century no one among the Jews of Oudlājān used to speak any of their traditional dialects¹⁰⁶, they still had a specific way of speaking, with a strong accent and a specific intonation¹⁰⁷, that Roja Hakakian defines as «Persian peppered with Hebrew»¹⁰⁸. She adds «Where the Persian syllable required a rise, Jews dipped their stress; where it required a dip, they dipped their stress even more».¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Akan and Maksudyan, *Urban Neighbourhood Formations*, 1-2.

¹⁰⁴ See: Levy, *Comprehensive History*, 438.

¹⁰⁵ As described by Habib Levy, the Oudlājān dwellers used to stretched out words and sentences, Levy, *Comprehensive History*, 439.

¹⁰⁶ For a complete analysis of the Judeo- Persian language I suggest reading: Vera Basch Moreen, *Judeo- Persian Literature*, in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 962-969; Vera Basch, Moreen, *Queen Esther's Garden: An Anthology of Judeo-Persian Literature*, (Piscataway, NJ, USA: Gorgias Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁷ Personal interview with Yousef, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

¹⁰⁸ Farideh Goldin, *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman*. (London: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 50.

¹⁰⁹ Goldin, *Wedding Song*, 50.

The term ‘*mahalleh*’, as employed by some Jews instead of the proper name of the quarter, does not show an evident derogatory intent, but rather the desire to create a strong distinction between the Jews living outside and the Oudlājān dwellers. Indeed, also within the Jewish community of Tehran, living or not in Oudlājān was the sign of two different social strata (even though not all Jews of Oudlājān were in poor economic conditions) and of two different communities: «the wealthy-elite-non-*mahalleh*-dwellers and the poor-*mahalleh*-dwellers».¹¹⁰ Oudlājān was not, generally speaking, a wealthy quarter, but it wasn't neither a poor one.

The economic situation was, once again, different not only between the various religious communities but also within each of them. The specificities of Oudlājān were, indeed, its multifaceted social classes which could live side by side in harmony. The distinction that the Jewish non-*mahalleh*-dwellers perceived toward the Jewish inhabitants of the quarter depended on historical reasons. Indeed, the internal migration to greater Tehran of some Jewish families of Oudlājān started decades before the complete abandonment of the quarter in the 1950s. Some families moved out already in the early years of the twentieth century, when the Jews, following the Constitutional movement, started having a new social and political space into the Iranian society. However, the majority of these early migrations took place in the late 1920s especially for economic reasons: Reza Shah's policy towards religious minorities of the country led many Jews to hold, for the first time, government jobs and get government licenses to open shops outside of their historical neighbourhoods. This also prompted some Jews of Oudlājān to open their shops in new commercial areas of Tehran and start their businesses there. Some Jews started also working at the court of the first Pahlavi, holding important position of responsibility, like diplomats. As specified by Mohsen, many Tehrani Jews at the time spoke French language and were well educated, thanks to the work of the French Alliance school, which was operating in Oudlājān since the nineteenth century. All of this favoured the emigration of some families, albeit still in a small number, from Oudlājān to the northern part of the capital. The movement of these families to greater Tehran led to the formation of a social hierarchy, especially for the emergence of a new Jewish middle class. Anyway, this division between the ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’¹¹¹, which was very strong in that period also within the Jews, was one of the factors that contributed, once again, to the nourishing of a strong collective identity within the Oudlājān dwellers.

In general, the use of the term ‘*mahalleh*’ as a generic designator, used alone or with other adjectives (as in the case of *mahalleh-ye yahudi* – Jewish quarter), has become the common expression to indicate a social space on the margins.

In addition, the constant use of the word ‘ghetto’¹¹² to describe Oudlājān, is symptomatic of a distorted comparison between Oudlājān and the Jewish ghettos in

¹¹⁰ See: Lawrence Loeb, *Outcaste: Jewish Life in Southern Iran*, (New York: Gordon & Breach, 1977), 74.

¹¹¹ The two expressions are used in Amy Mills, Boundaries of the nation in the space of the urban: landscape and social memory in Istanbul, *Cultural Geographies* 13, no. 3, (2006): 367-394, esp. 385.

¹¹² For an interesting approach on the use of the word ghetto, especially in the academia, I recommend watching the lesson given by prof. Lior Sternfeld entitled *Iran Colloquium: Mahalleh or Ghetto? The Challenges of Writing a Jewish History of Iran*, October 2019. The lesson is available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jPLU9YpHNY> (Accessed on May 2020). Some scholars like Vivier-Muresan use the term ghetto referring to the Jewish quarter of

Europe.¹¹³ This rather daring comparison is misleading for different reasons, especially because ‘ghetto’ is not a neutral term. Indeed, when used in a Jewish context, it creates a world of images that do not reflect the reality of the Jewish situation in Iran, particularly in the twentieth century. The improper use of the term ghetto is configured, in the collective imagination, as referring to other places of Jewish concentration, which belonged to other geographical areas and to different historical periods. In this sense, the term associated with the Jewish quarter of Oudlājān has been used precisely as a stereotype, namely as a term related to a marginal space and to a condition of marginality.¹¹⁴ The use of the term ‘ghetto’ in most cases is employed in a derogatory way, especially because of the universal character it has, as a stigmatizing designator of an urban area. Yousef, during our meeting in Tehran, began the conversation by reiterating the absolute strangeness of Oudlājān with the European ghettos. And, several times, during our conversation within the walls of the synagogue of Ezra Yaghoub¹¹⁵ reiterated the same sentence in Persian: *Oudlājān mesl-e gettohāy-e orupā nabud* (Oudlājān was not like the ghettos in Europe.) He states:

Oudlājān was completely different from any European ghetto, first of all because it was a multicultural neighbourhood, where we were living peacefully all together. The association with ghettos and the Jews is quite easy for people. I will lie if I say that everything was fine: we indeed felt more discriminated and more unsafe than the Muslims, especially the old generation that had a different consciousness of the past of the Jews in Iran and felt anti-Semitism. For example, in the past Jews used to build their synagogues on a corridor, so it could be defended if someone invaded the synagogue. But this changed later, and we were living together, as brothers.¹¹⁶

The adoption of the word ‘ghetto’ and of the terms ‘mahalleh’ or ‘Mahalleh’ when employed by people outside the neighbourhood is, generally speaking, the result of the symbolic adoption of norms, the conception of normalizing ideologies, historical conjunctures or collective representations that will result in the process of stigmatization and discrimination of Oudlājān and its inhabitants.¹¹⁷ These processes will be decisive in determining the future of the Oudlājān community,

Shiraz and the same does Farideh Golding in her book *Wedding Song*: in this context they do not use the term in its historical sense, as it is in Europe, but as a distinct and separate neighbourhood suffering from stigmatisation and poverty (Vivier-Muresan, *Communitarian Neighborhoods*, 593). Other times, it has been adopted without negative meanings, but in a completely neutral way, especially when it is used in novels, where it is more recognized as a literary license. As stated by Sarshar they take artistic liberty to use the term while aware of the differences.

¹¹³ See for example the use of the term ‘ghetto’ in the English edition of Levy’s book (Levy, *Comprehensive History*) and the comparison of Oudlājān with the European ghettos made by Goldstain in his book *My world as a Jew*.

¹¹⁴ Cattedra, *Le parole del territorio*, 278.

¹¹⁵ Ezra Yaghoub is one of the oldest synagogues in Oudlājān, dated from the Nasser Al-Din Shah dynasty. As referred by Habib Levy, it was built in 1858 (of the Persian calendar) according to the will of Ezra Yaghoub, who was one of the most important merchants of that period, who had opened his business also in different English cities. Until the 1940’s was one of the major centres of Jewish gathering in *Sarechāl*, located in the previous called Cyrus Street (now Mustafa Khomeini Street). From the 1950’s started losing a large number of members, due to the significant migration of Jews from *Oudlājān*. The synagogue is still in function today. The synagogue, which is still existing, is now registered as a national heritage monument.

¹¹⁶ Personal Interview with Yousef, Tehran, November 2019.

¹¹⁷ Cattedra, *Le parole del territorio*, 275.

which felt the full weight of discrimination and isolation. Marginality and poverty were conditions that certainly existed in Oudlājān, especially compared to the large, new and modern neighbourhoods of the north of Tehran. These conditions, although existing, were common to all the historical quarters of the south of the capital and were not attributable to the fact that most of the inhabitants of Oudlājān were Jews.

Anyway, the marginalization that the Jews suffered in the quarter was tangible and was also observed in the complete negligence of the central authorities towards the neighbourhood: the whole history of a community was leaking in the ruined narrow alleys of Oudlājān, in the streets without concrete and in deteriorating houses. In this regard Mohsen reports:

Everyone thinks that Oudlājān was a poor neighbourhood. And this is actually true just in part: Oudlājān was a poor neighbourhood compared to the other parts of Tehran. One of the signs of the poverty of the quarter was that it was not asphalted until the late 1950s and early 1960s. Moreover, the water system was terrible. Therefore, to our eyes and to the eyes of the others it was not as clean as the rest of Tehran. In this sense, the life inside was not easy¹¹⁸.

1.4 The re-evaluation of the quarter through memories

The descriptions of the quarter that have been reported in the last pages generated a superficial reconstruction of the history of Oudlājān and its inhabitants. For those reasons, the aim of the next pages of this work is to redefine Oudlājān through the use of personal memories of its dwellers. The goal is to give an image of the quarter as more than a poor and unclean quarter: it was, indeed, the place of alliance, community, family, and it «was everything we would have ever dreamt of as children - a beautiful space to play, a family always together, a sentiment of protection».¹¹⁹

Oudlājān is the place where the memories of the community and the family past are crystallized, created by a balance of social, religious, and architectural elements. Through these memories it is possible to carry out a revaluation of the neighbourhood itself, whose image has too often been the victim of a false historical reconstruction. Indeed, the memories that the Jews share of Oudlājān are able to respond to the distorted and superficial visions of the neighbourhood that we have mentioned in the previous paragraph. Their words become forms of «anti-stigmatization»¹²⁰ and are the result of a strong feeling of intimacy and solidarity with that place. Thanks to that, Oudlājān from a space to the margins becomes a place of resistance: this resilience is expressed through a series of memories and values that do justice to the neighbourhood, succeeding in the intent of revaluating it completely. In this regard, the sweet words of the poet Nourollah Khoramian, who defines Sarechāl as a *kākh* (palace), convey the great attachment of Tehrani Jews to their neighbourhood, which was embodied with great intimacy as a place full of beauty and sweetness. He writes: «Oh, how sweet was the air of Sarechāl, the Palace of Mahalleh and all its beauty».¹²¹

Similarly, the words of Kyle Newman are particularly important:

¹¹⁸ Personal online interview, December 2020.

¹¹⁹ Personal interview with Asal, Tehran November 2019.

¹²⁰ Cattedra, *Le parole del territorio*, 276.

¹²¹ Nourollah Khoramian, *Oh Hear the Story of Mahaheh Palace* Los Angeles, 1992. Translated into English prose and cited in Sarechal.com http://sarechal.com/NewMainPages/Mahaleh_Palace_English.html

To reminisce is to remember with pleasure, to recollect past events while indulging in the enjoyment of nostalgic return. It would be too simplistic to say that the Jews of Iran reminisce blissfully about their past in a country with a fraught history of antisemitism, yet too harsh to conclude that the calamities they endured ought to completely overshadow their 2500 years of rich history. Memories of Sarechāl, the Jewish ghetto¹²² of Tehran, serve as living manifestations of this ambivalent train of thought. A dynamic community that was forced to adapt to the ebb and flow of life under monarchical Shi'a regimes, Sarechāl was much more than a physical location that housed Iran's urban Jews from the dawn of the Safavid dynasty through to the troughs of a new Islamic Republic. But anything short of active remembrance would serve as a disrespectful gesture to the rag sellers, fabric dealers, grocers, midwives, homemakers, rabbis, butchers, dairymen, and tailors that made life in ghettos like Sarechāl sustainable and even vibrant, not to mention the Muslim business owners and civilians who continued to associate with Jewish communities despite institutional restrictions that prohibited them from doing so.¹²³

All the stories I have been told about Oudlājān are related to childhood memories and therefore full of sweetness and light-heartedness. Since we are dealing with childhood memories, the majority of the respondents have brought back life stories connected to significant female figures of their infancy: in these memories the dominance of mothers, grandmothers and aunts emerge. In the contrary, the figure of the father was somehow marginal and his role within the family quite invisible. Indeed, if the figure of the mother was linked to the daily life of the respondents, the father was mentioned just in specific cases. For example, the father was a prominent figure in the memories related to the work environment and, especially for boys, he was related to one definite place, the synagogue, namely a 'male' space. Often the interviewees spoke about their fathers' work. This especially when it was a job of great prestige for which there was the reverence of the whole neighbourhood.

Mohsen's words are an example of it:

My father was a pharmacist. He had studied in France between 1920/1025 and he became a pharmacist there. He died when I was very young in 1949. During his time in Iran, he had a drug store where he used to prepare medicine for warms. We had a lot of problem with warms. Many of us. And the medication he invented helped people a lot. He was selling his medicine in all the drug stores there¹²⁴.

Anyway, analysing the stories of my respondents, Oudlājān appears most of all a 'feminine quarter' and this is one of the reasons why women have a privileged space in this work. Esther, for example, explains:

When I think of Oudlājān, my grandmother, my father's mother, immediately comes to mind. For me she was the queen of the neighbourhood, and my

¹²² Although I disagree with the use of the word 'ghetto', I believe that these words are very intense because they tell the ambivalent nature of the relationship that binds Jews to their land, Iran, and express the need to look at memories to regain possession of the past.

¹²³ Kyle Newman, essay 10 - *Sarechal: The Forgotten History of Tehran's Jewish Ghetto*, Zaman website. Accessed online on 13 January 2021. <https://www.zamancollective.com/all-posts/the-forgotten-history-of-sarchal>

¹²⁴ Personal online interview with Mohsen, December 2020.

sweetest memories are tied to her. She grew old there in the neighbourhood and she also died there. I still remember her lying in a small childbed because when she was old, she had become very small. She was beautiful and I loved her so much.¹²⁵

Another important aspect, related to the memories of the respondents, is that the quarter has been for the majority of Tehrani Jews their «primal landscape»¹²⁶ and therefore these childhood memories are closely linked to their growth, both as individuals and as members of the community. The Jews who had grown up in the neighbourhood keep the memory of a familiar and joyful place, where they had lived in the simplicity of a children's life made up of games, school, and many friends. Eshagh Shaoul, for example, refers to his childhood in Oudlājān as follow: «I cannot forget the memories of *Sarechāl*, its streets, shops, people, smells, and music»¹²⁷; while Jahangir Sedaghatfar, in a good passage of his poem '*Memories on the Wall*', writes: «Yet memories explode in a rainbow of colours, green buds of hope, red blossoms of happiness, a golden halo of friendship»¹²⁸. Hoori Amram-Shaoul, in her text *Sukkot in Sarechāl*, emotionally writes about her memories as a young girl in Sarechāl. In the text she defines her most beautiful memory as the one related to the building of the *Sukkah* for the Jewish festival of *Sukkot*¹²⁹. She remembers:

When it was time, my dad would bring out beautiful colourful canvas for the walls, the boys would cut branches of weeping willows for the roof, and we girls would hang pomegranates from them. Then, from the first to the eighth night of Sukkot, the six mothers who lived in the house would come, each carrying a Persian rug for inside the Sukkah. Every night the six families would sit on their rugs around their '*sofrehs*' (tablecloths) on which they had placed their own special foods and trays with their samovars and small tea glasses. Can you imagine this big Sukkah with six different colour rugs, six different size samovars, and six different colour oil lamps giving off soft light? I remember how exciting it was for us to eat in the Sukkah every night, then to go to one of the synagogues on our street. How easy it was to get there since we lived on Seven Synagogue Street right in the heart of Sarechāl¹³⁰.

Some Jewish families, who lived outside the Jewish quarter in Tehran, always maintained a daily or weekly relationship with Oudlājān. It was for them the place where all the family used to gather during Jewish and Persian festivities, the place where to meet cousins and cultivate the sense of family and community. For these families, who at the core of the twentieth centuries were living out in a changing and fast-growing city, Oudlājān was the place where to find their roots and

¹²⁵ Personal interview, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

¹²⁶ Don Gayton, *Landscapes of the Interior: Re-explorations of Nature and the Human Spirit*, (Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers, 1996).

¹²⁷ Sarechal.com - Its Purpose, Background, Memories and Hopes by Eshagh Shaoul. Accessed on 28 February 2020. <http://sarechal.com/NewMainPages/Purpose.html>

¹²⁸ Memories on the wall, a poem by Jahangir Sedaghatfar published in *Daftar-e-Honar* (vol 7, No.12, Feb 19, 2000), translated from Farsi into English by R. Shaoul.

¹²⁹ The festival, called also 'Festival of Tabernacles', is a Biblical Jewish holiday celebrated on the 15th day of the seventh month called Tishrei (from late September to late October).

¹³⁰ Sarechal.com - Sukkot in Sarechal. Accessed on 18 January 2021. http://sarechal.com/NewMainPages/sukkot_in_sarechal.htm.html

traditions and where to cultivate their religiosity.¹³¹ For Shehrazād, for example, the quarter represented her Jewishness in many senses, especially because it was the place where to practice religion, pray and where to celebrate Jewish festivities. Those Jews like Shehrazād have fond memories of Oudlājān and they could describe them to me with equal intensity and emotion. She remembers:

In the neighbourhood there was so much poverty, but I felt this only partially. One day I remember seeing my cousin sewing his shoes because the sole had come off. Or another cousin was about to die because from his old house a piece of the door had broken off and *raft tui-ye dastesh* (had ended up on his hand). But I did not care. After the holidays I never wanted to leave the neighbourhood and go back to my beautiful house in the north; leave my aunts and cousins and go back to being alone. I wished I could stay there forever, playing in the big house of *khāleh Mariam*, the sister of my grandmother who had no children and had adopted us all. I would have liked to have been there forever. Being with *khāleh Mariam* was such a joy. She was the funniest person because whatever you ate, she wanted to taste it too and she took it from your hands. I will never, ever forget how hard we laughed!¹³²

Asal expresses herself with the same emotional words. She says:

One of the best memories of my childhood was the vitality of Oudlājān, with its scents, its colours and its thousand voices. Every day, the streets of the neighbourhood echoed with the sounds of devotion to God as the communities prayed, each at its own place of worship. It was difficult not to be enchanted by everything that was happening around me.¹³³

Many interviewees retraced the memories of their life in Oudlājān through the noises and the sounds that characterized the quarter. For example, Yousef says: «as a child I was attracted by Muslim festivities, especially the Ashura, of which I can still remember the sounds from the narrow alleys».¹³⁴

While Haroun Yashayaei in his book-memoir, states that the noise of the neighbourhood, unmistakable, was like *āhang-e musiqi* – a melodic song.¹³⁵ Similarly, Shamsi recalls:

Our life in Sarechāl was characterized by a great sense of intimacy and community. It was a continuous repetition of the same incessant noises and sounds that mingled together: there was the chatter of the merchants in the shops, the voices of women who were shopping and looking for the best prices, or the noise of the children's games in the streets. It was an incessant bustle of residents.¹³⁶

Besides the daily sounds of the quarter, music appears as a constant in the life of many inhabitants of Oudlājān. Music was the accompaniment for all the most important ceremonies in Oudlājān, which represented a moment of great emotion

¹³¹ See: Mereu, Oudlājān Memories.

¹³² Personal interview, Rome January 2020. My translation from Persian,

¹³³ Personal interview, Tehran November 2019. My translation from Persian.

¹³⁴ Personal interview. Tehran November 2019. My translation from Persian.

¹³⁵ Yashayaei, *Ruzi ke esm-e khod rā dānestam*, 14.

¹³⁶ Personal interview. Tehran November 2019. My translation from Persian.

and union for the whole community. Mohsen himself was a musician, who used to play violin also during wedding ceremonies in Oudlājān. He proudly states:

I played music, violin and this made my family and neighbours very happy. I have a friend here who live in Maryland now, and she remembers that when she was marrying, I played violin at her wedding. I started at the age of 8 until I went to New York.

One of the most beautiful photos I have seen about the daily life inside the neighbourhood depicts an old woman covered with a black veil; she was sitting on a floor made of colourful carpets. In her hand the woman carried a typical Iranian guitar. She was Sara Koor, «the favourite and beloved musician of the people of Sarechāl»¹³⁷.

1.5 Being Iranians and Jews: the construction of an identity through the quarter

Since the Qajar era, Tehran has played an important and unique role in the construction of what at the time was still an embryonic sentiment of national belonging. From the 1930s, with the advent of Reza Pahlavi, the capital acquired an important role in shaping nationalistic ideas. Tehran could greatly represent Iranian national sentiment and identity because it was a city of convergence of languages, ethnicities, and religions that «required a natural recognition of difference as well as a cultural system of sharing urban space»¹³⁸. The so-called *hoviāt-e melli*, which was built during the reign of the first Pahlavi, redraw the previous sentiment of national unity of the Iranian people: before that period the Iranian society was mainly divided into communities, which belonged to different ethnic, economic, and religious groups. These communities were mostly isolated from each other for social and also geographical reasons. In this regard, the role of the government and of the State after the advent of Reza Pahlavi became more central in the life of the citizens, enforcing the sentiment of belonging, which was inside everyone since centuries.

Oudlājān was, for its Jewish dwellers, what Teheran was for the majority of its inhabitants: namely, the place where to create their individual and collective identity and where to cultivate a profound sense of belonging to the Iranian nation. In particular, the old quarter, which is the guardian of the memories of the community, had a unique role in shaping their identity as Iranians. Indeed, Oudlājān was a multicultural microcosm, way before the expansion of Tehran.

This sentiment of belonging that the Jews shared with Oudlājān is closely related to the question of the Iranian identity and culture. Undeniably, the question of spatiality, which is defined by Anthony D. Smith as ‘territorialization’, has always played a crucial role in the Iranian culture, favouring the construction and maintenance of the Iranian identity. In this respect, also Oudlājān has been a key element in the construction of the Jewish belonging to the Iranian homeland, for its crucial role in the spatial organization and social life of the community. As Hanechee argues, the concept of neighbourhood in the Iranian culture has always

¹³⁷ Sarechal.com

¹³⁸ Amy Mills, *Streets of Memory: Landscape, Tolerance, and National Identity in Istanbul*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 7.

been accompanied by sense of well-being, security, and identity; therefore, the sense of place that the Jews shared in Oudlājān had contributed to constructing their belonging to the Iranian nation, their beloved native soil. In this regard, Sari's words take on a powerful and evocative meaning. During our meeting in Tehran, she states:

After many years abroad, I have decided to come back to my beloved Iran, because I belong to Oudlājān and there is no other place in the world where I can live¹³⁹.

In this regard, we can affirm that the quarter strongly contributed to the formation of the identity of its dwellers, the «distinctive essence»¹⁴⁰ in which the people of Oudlājān could identify themselves. Indeed, in Oudlājān the Jewish residents used to live in what Pirnazar defines as a «dual consciousness»¹⁴¹, a consciousness of belonging to the quarter, to the religious community and to their beloved country, Iran.

The reason of how Oudlājān had played a crucial role in favouring this sense of belonging needs to be found, first of all, in the sentiment that the Jews share with their quarter. Furthermore, Oudlājān, as a space of existence, has provided an opportunity for the residents to regain their identity within a familiarized sphere;¹⁴² moreover, Oudlājān provided stability and protection to the Jewish residents, who could recognize themselves in that quarter that was the guardian of their own religious traditions. Indeed, Oudlājān represented the true essence of the Jewish identity of the community.

The strong attachment to the territory that the Jews shared in Oudlājān contributed to nurturing a common sense of identity as Iranians. This allowed them to develop continuous contact with the other religious communities in the quarter. Actually, although Oudlājān was a Jewish majority neighbourhood, it had also always been inhabited by other religious communities, such as Shiite Muslims and Zoroastrians. In Oudlājān, which was the symbol also of social life and human relations, the three religious' communities in the neighbourhood, used to live side by side. Jews, Shiite Muslims and Zoroastrians were united by a strong sense of familiarity, mutual respect and assistance, a sentiment that was a consequence of the common belonging to a multicultural neighbourhood. The relationship between the communities was not easy in the past, mainly due to prejudices that have played a fundamental role in the historical perception of Muslims towards Iranian Jews and vice versa. As referred by many respondents, older people had more prejudices towards Muslims, and they managed with more hardship to integrate into the reality of Oudlājān in the twentieth century. Many Jewish elders still lived with the conviction that Muslims considered them inferior, referring to the stories of their grandparents and parents, who had suffered severe discrimination. It is true that especially in the past the situation of the Jews in Iran was more insecure and, in some period, marked by a profound isolation.

¹³⁹ Personal interview, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

¹⁴⁰ Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism*, 123.

¹⁴¹ Jaleh Pirnazar, Voices of Marginality: Diversity in Jewish Iranian Women's Memoirs and Beyond, in *The Jews of Iran: The History, Religion, and Culture of a Community in the Islamic World*, ed. Houman Sarshar (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), 191-202, esp. 192.

¹⁴² Pirouz Hanachee & Naimeh Rezaei, Living in a Historical Neighborhood: Challenges, Opportunities and Threats, Case Study: Oudlajan Neighborhood in Tehran, *Armanshahr Architecture & Urban Development* 7, no. 14, (Summer, 2015): 63-72, esp. 64.

In the twentieth century the situation improved strongly, and the Jews of Oudlājān lived mostly in relative peace and were also able to flourish from a cultural, economic and in general social point of view. The three communities, especially Jews and Muslims, learnt to live with respect for the traditions of each other. On different occasions, respect was also accompanied by a great desire to co-participate in the religious ceremonies of the communities. Nargol Aran, in his article ‘The defender: waiting for the revolution in Tehran’ reports the words of Haroun Yashayaie, the former head of the *Anjoman-e Kalimiān-e Tehrān*, Tehran Jewish Committee¹⁴³, he writes:

Relationships were mostly cordial, defined by distance and respect. On Shabbat, Muslim neighbours would turn on the lights of the synagogue. His brother helped Muslim neighbors cook *nazri*—food made for public distribution during Ashura, when the Shi’a mourn the death of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad and continues Yashayaie remembers watching Ashura passion plays from the rooftop and can still recite the lament songs, having performed as Hussein’s warrior son, Ali al-Akbar¹⁴⁴.

In the early twentieth century, each community inhabited a specific part of the neighbourhood, and had its own bazaar, its public bathrooms, its schools. Nevertheless, the narrow streets of Oudlājān were a common passage, which became a place of meeting and often of confrontation. The three communities were different in many aspects, but deeply linked by a common sense of belonging to this historic district and by a destiny of marginality and a-sociality. It is in this sense that Oudlājān can be defined as a place of coexistence: the diversity of the quarter, in its ethnic and religious sense, contributed to cultivating this profound sense of unity. Yousef remembers:

After the creation of the State of Israel, many people came from out of Oudlājān to attack the Jews, for the only reason of sharing the same religion with the new inhabitants of Palestine. Our Muslim neighbours came to our aid, expelling them from our shared neighbourhood. I saw it with my eyes, 65 years ago. This is the essence of the Iranian culture.

And again, referring to the relationship with the Muslim dwellers of Oudlājān, he states:

There was, of course, discrimination also between us, but when you are a child, you don’t care about these things. And for the Muslim kids it was the same. We have tried to get closer to the Muslims since our childhood. For example, when we wanted to play volleyball, we tried to choose players among both Muslim and Jewish kids¹⁴⁵.

¹⁴³ The Tehran Jewish Committee is a Jewish association based in Tehran that was established in the 1934. The association takes care of the maintenance and administration of more than twenty-five synagogues in Teheran, of the Jewish elderly care, of the two Jewish cemeteries, Jewish schools and of the control over the Kosher. For an analysis on the history of the association see: Amnon Netzer, *Anjoman-e Kalimian*, In *Jewish Communities of Iran: Entries on Judeo Persian Communities*, edited, ed. Houman Sarshar, (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2011): 317-318.

¹⁴⁴ Nargol Aran, ‘The defender: waiting for the revolution in Tehran’, *The Point*, Issue 20, September 2019. Accessed in August 2020. <https://thepointmag.com/politics/the-defender/>

¹⁴⁵ Personal interview. November 2019. My translation from Persian.

Many interviewees described Oudlājān as a place of interaction and coexistence through the different sounds of devotion to God that filled the streets of the neighbourhood at every hour of the day. These sounds have become so familiar that their memory often turns into melancholy.

Eshagh Shaoul recalls:

I remember the Jewish holidays and the Muslim holidays, and I am still fascinated by the differences and the knowledge that these holidays had been celebrated in the South of Tehran side by side for centuries. I can't forget singing *Mizmor le David* in the synagogue in Sarechāl. Nor can I forget the beautiful music of *Allah 'o Akbar* at noontime and the Muslim friends that put religion aside and offered me their friendship.¹⁴⁶

In my interviewees I could find an absolutely positive perception of the cultural and religious diversity of the quarter, which has been mostly perceived and described as a richness.

During the period of the building process of the Iranian identity through a policy of unification and homologation¹⁴⁷, which started under Reza Shah Pahlavi, the Jews of Tehran who were still living in Oudlājān, cultivated a strong sentiment of national unity that was far from the political ideology of the Shah. It was still a pure sentiment of belonging, which was constructed on a historical sense of attachment to Iran, their motherland. It did not have any specific name or ideological framework, but it was built upon a daily life in the quarter. It was mostly an identity created by a combination of national sentiment, religious affiliation, and a sense of belonging to a community: this identity represented «the interplay of social and physical factors, which can be externally and internally defined-simultaneously imposed and self-generated»¹⁴⁸.

As proudly argued by the respondents, Oudlājān, as a multicultural neighbourhood, had contributed to the formation of a national sentiment for a country, Iran, which is built on differences. Indeed, Oudlājān helped the Jews to integrate themselves with this idea of a multicultural nation, where every religion, ethnicity and language could find their place. Indeed, the quarter, as the «place through which complex ethnic, religious, linguistic, and urban identities were blended and articulated»¹⁴⁹, represented the fundamental base for the construction of an identity, both collective, as Iranians, and individual, as Jews. As argued by Dallalfar «Iranian Jews in their religious practices in the synagogues and at home were involved in the production and reconstruction of both an Iranian identity and Judeo-Persian cultural and religious traditions»¹⁵⁰.

¹⁴⁶ Sarechal.com - Its Purpose, Background, Memories and Hopes by Eshagh Shaoul. Accessed on 28 February 2020.

¹⁴⁷ This process started during the advent of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1930s.

¹⁴⁸ Douglas Robertson, James Smyth and Ian McIntosh, *Neighbourhood Identity: People, Time and Place*, (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008), 1.

¹⁴⁹ Mills, *Streets of Memory*, 39.

¹⁵⁰ Arlene Dallalfar, Synagogues and Sacred Rituals in Tehran: An Ethnographic Analysis of Judeo-Persian Identities and Spaces, ed., Gharipour Mohammad, *Synagogues in the Islamic World: Architecture, Design and Identity*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017): 185-204, esp. 185.

1.6 Places of the quarter: an historical and family heritage

The history of the community is strongly intertwined with the symbolic and material places of the neighbourhood, which have become guardians of the indelible memory of a community and never fail to be mentioned by the interviewees: the schools of Oudlājān, the synagogues, the public baths and the main streets of the quarter are the background to all the life stories which I was told and through them Oudlājān takes shape, reliving in such distant memories. These spaces of memory have, indeed, the ability to give foundation to a certain sentimental identity, becoming themselves a historical and family heritage.

Using the expression of Pierre Nora, these places function as *lieux de memoire*, namely places «where memory crystallizes and secrets itself»¹⁵¹. For this important function, they contribute to the formation of a strong sense of attachment, a deep emotional sentiment that characterizes the relationship between the Jews and the quarter still today. They are places where the interplay between history and memory gets stronger, sometimes in the wrong way. On different occasions, while remembering these places, the stories I was told did not match and sometimes people failed to give me a proper historical background of their stories and memories. But every single story was told from the heart, digging into a past that, in some case, was buried in a deeper grave. This reminds to the emotional words of Gina Nahai in her book *Caspian Rain*. She writes:

Memory does not often serve the truth. I have learned this. I know I might have heard a vow my father never uttered, held on the pipe dream of a promise he never made. But imperfect as it may be, memory is all I have to help me bear witness¹⁵².

The Oudlājān quarter had specific urban characteristics typical of many traditional Iranian cities, like a system of alleys and *kuchehā-ye bārik*, narrow streets without an end. The streets of the quarter, in the twentieth century, were still covered in dirt floor, which caused some problems especially during the rainy days. Haroon, in his memoir book, remembers that, with the first rains of the season, the soil floor (*kaf-e khāki*) «became swampy».¹⁵³

Tsadik in 2011 described Sarechāl as follows:

The Tehran quarter was forming a tangled maze; the sometimes covered, sometime open streets are so narrow that you instinctively expect each one to come to a dead end when walking through them. These twisting corridors border homes made of stones and brick or of clay baked in the sun; they have never seen plaster. These homes appear to have become resigned to having the rain wash away their walls little by little and to letting them fall in clumps on the heads of the passer-by. The negligence of the property owners finally destroys the rest... the rooms are built around a narrow courtyard, which is hardly as wide as a handkerchief and they are stacked one upon the other, without opening dark and bare¹⁵⁴.

¹⁵¹ Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire. Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24, esp. 7.

¹⁵² Gina Nahai, *Caspian Rain*, (Douglas: MP Publishing Ltd, 2008), Kobo edition, 606.

¹⁵³ Yashayaei, *Ruzi ke esm-e khod rā dānestam*, 15.

¹⁵⁴ Daniel Tsadik, 2011. The Qajar Period, In *Jewish Communities of Iran: Entries on Judeo-Persian Communities*, ed. Houman Sarshar, (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2011): 46-60, esp. 47-48.

The houses of the quarter were mostly made of «unbaked brick with made-facades»¹⁵⁵. As a reminiscence of the imposition of the Safavid era (1501-1736),¹⁵⁶ the houses of Oudlājān were vast constructions expanded more in width than in height. Indeed, in the past, Jewish houses were not allowed to be higher than those of their Muslim neighbours. Sarshar in his article *Mahalleh*, argues that the imposition of specific architectural characteristics was made in order to distinguish the Jews from the Muslims. Although Oudlājān did probably not yet exist in the Safavid age, the architectural impositions were maintained over the time and wielded a strong influence also in Oudlājān.

Another common characteristic of the houses of the quarter was the presence of a large courtyard, mainly used to grow vegetables and for gatherings. The size of the courtyard depended on the financial situation of the family. In some houses, in the courtyard, there was a big cistern for the drainage of rainfall, which was mainly used for vegetables and also as a potable water. The great sociality of the quarter can be seen in the fact that some houses were devoid of cistern. Therefore, the family collected potable water from their neighbours. Anyway, in the quarter there was a larger cistern in the Ezra Yaghoub synagogue, serving the whole community.¹⁵⁷ Shehrazād¹⁵⁸ gave a beautiful description of her grandparents' house. She remembers:

My grandfather's house in Oudlājān was like a Roman house, extended like a Pompeian house: it was large and was facing North, South, East and West. There was a large *derakht-e tut* (mulberry tree) and a rooster always stood in the immense garden. The rooster was so violent that pecked the legs of anyone approaching.

1.6.1 *The synagogues*

The hearts of the communitarian life in Oudlājān were the bazaar and the *kanise*¹⁵⁹ - synagogue. The bazaar, as in all Iranian neighbourhoods, was not only the economic heart of Oudlājān, but also functioned, as will be analysed below, as a meeting place especially for women. The synagogue, on the contrary, was the gathering place especially for men. Kanise-ye Ezra Yaghoub, Mollah Hanina, Elisafan and Hadash, «all shin[ing] like jewels»¹⁶⁰, were just a few of the fourteen synagogues of Oudlājān. Every family had its own favourite synagogue, which was, in most of the cases, the traditional one of the family since their arrival to Tehran. Even though the geographical distinction was less significant in the twentieth century and people started attending ceremonies in different synagogues according

¹⁵⁵ Levy, *Comprehensive History*, 438.

¹⁵⁶ The Jews in Iran faced a long history of discrimination especially after the advent of the Safavid dynasty. This period was marked by various restrictions imposed by the religious authorities to the Jewish communities of Iran. For example, the Jews were barred from touching foods in Muslim shops and were not allowed to use public Muslim baths. Moreover, it was forbidden for them to drink water from a public well. See: Sarshar Housman, Mahalleh, ed. Housman Sarshar, *Esther's Children; a Portrait of Iranian Jews*, (Beverly Hills: Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002).

¹⁵⁷ Levy, *Comprehensive History*, 439.

¹⁵⁸ Personal interview. Rome, January 2020. My translation from Persian.

¹⁵⁹ The term *kanise* in Persian is derived from the ancient Aramaic language spoken by the Babylonian Jews.

¹⁶⁰ From the poem of Nourollah Khoramian, *Hekāyat beshnav az kākhe mahalleh* (Los Angeles, 1992), translated into English prose.

to the position of their houses, there was still a preference for a certain synagogue. Nargol Aran in his interview with Haroun Yashayaie the former head of the Tehran Jewish Committee, reports «Pointing to the path leading inside the synagogue, he tells me that his bar mitzvah was held here: If I close my eyes, I can remember the sound of our steps, my friends and I, as we ran here pushing the flower arrangement on a trolley». Mohsen reports that he used to go to two different synagogues, of which he has many familiar memories, even if he does not remember their specific names. The synagogues he attended depended on his companion: his paternal grandfather took him to one, while his maternal grandfather took him to another.

The structure of each synagogue in Oudlājān followed the traditional construction of every Jewish religious building in Iran. As Carmeli refers, «the synagogue was low, not to exceed in height any Muslim monument as mandated by Shi'ite laws prior to the mid-twentieth century... there were neither galleries, no seats of any type in the synagogue and the entire congregation would sit on the carpet-covered floor, having removed their shoes before entering the main sanctuary. The only article of furniture would be the *tevah* or *bimah* (the reader's desk) which was also covered with carpets or decorative textiles».¹⁶¹ Although simplicity was one of the main features of the Oudlājān synagogues, in Mohsen's eyes they all looked wonderful, especially in comparison with the more modern ones that the Jewish community would have built outside Oudlājān from the fifties of the twentieth century.¹⁶²

The most important synagogues of Oudlājān were on *Kucheh-ye Haft Kenise* (Seven Synagogue Street)¹⁶³, which was one of the most densely populated areas of the neighbourhood and the heart of the interactions of its inhabitants: the small street had seven synagogues and more than thirty-five houses all around. *Kucheh-ye Haft Kenise* had gathered, since their arrival in Iran, Jews from different areas of Iran who had built their synagogues in this street: indeed, there was a Shirazi synagogue, a Yazidi one and another small one that most of the time used by the Kurds. On the left side of the house of Abrāhām Shoul, one of the biggest and most beautiful of the street, there was the first synagogue of the area, called *Kenise-ye Khāleh*. These synagogues were not so large and could accommodate a small number of worshippers, since they were built for a small population. Another characteristic of these constructions is that they were all close to each other, located within a less than one kilometre in the area of Oudlājān. This aspect would change later, when the Jews would begin to build their new synagogues in northern neighbourhoods. The physical proximity of these buildings also outlined a moral closeness, that indissoluble union of several Jewish communities that had found a home in Oudlājān and also a sense of belonging that went beyond the origins of each family.

1.6.2 *The schools*

During my fieldwork research and interviews I have noticed that there is a place that has remained in the hearts of many interviewees, who were children at the time

¹⁶¹ Orit Carmeli, The Material Culture and Ritual Objects of the Jews of Iran, in *The Jews of Iran: The History, Religion, and Culture of a Community in the Islamic World*, ed. Houman Sarshar (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), 143-172, esp. 158.

¹⁶² Personal online interview, December 2020.

¹⁶³ The street was renamed *Kucheh-ye Haft Masjed* (Seven Mosque Street) after the 1979 Revolution. Today there are neither synagogues nor mosques in this street.

of their life in Oudlājān: the school, a space for socializing, friendship, and interaction. Moreover, it was the place that gave them the opportunity of a better life.

Eshagh Shaoul, referring to the Etehād school, remembers:

The memories of the life in Etehād are the strongest memories of my life in Iran. The education at Etehād is the source of dreams I still have. In these dreams I revisit my old friends, the things we did in school, the fantasies we had and our plans to achieve those fantasies». ¹⁶⁴

For many girls, above all, it represented a chance to make their way into the Iranian society and, unlike their mothers and grandmothers, to have adequate education and to gain the opportunity to go to university. Many of these Jewish girls, who attended their primary school in Oudlājān, later enrolled in important high schools in Tehran and many of them attended university. The initial reluctance of many families to send their daughters to school was overcome by the great opportunities that a good education would offer them. In this regard Shehrazād is proud to point out that:

Women were not forbidden to learn, they were not prevented from reading and writing, they had been doing it since the time of the Prophet Mohammed. But obviously, at the cultural level, there was a certain ignorance about the role of school at the time. It was thought that at home and inside the family, girls could learn equally and that for women that was enough. But luckily, times soon changed in Oudlajan too and the girls were able to go to school and start a brilliant career¹⁶⁵.

In Oudlājān in the twentieth century, there were two schools. The first one was the Mirza Nourollah school, which later became known as Sedaghat, and its administrator, Mirza Jalinous-e Hakim, «was a man of great wisdom». ¹⁶⁶ The most important school of the neighbourhood was the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* ¹⁶⁷, better known by its Persian name Etehād: the administrators of the school, who are still well remembered by many of the former students I have interviewed, were Lardo, Nassi and Kohenka, «all of good fortune» ¹⁶⁸. Mohsen recalls:

We had very good teachers in Etehād and also wonderful administrators. When I was attending school, the head of the Etehād and the president were

¹⁶⁴ Sarechal.com - Its Purpose, Background, Memories and Hopes by Eshagh Shaoul. Accessed on 28 February 2020.

¹⁶⁵ Personal interview, Rome, January 2020. My translation from Persian.

¹⁶⁶ From the poem of Nourollah Khoramian *Hekāyat beshnav az kāk-e mahalleh*.

¹⁶⁷ The Alliance Israélite Universelle is a Paris-based international Jewish organization, which opened a Jewish school in Tehran in 1989. The school, aimed at the unification of the Jews and also the integration of them in the society, represented an opportunity for the Tehrani Jews in a period of revival of antisemitism in the world. In the academic year 1898-99, the number of students enrolled in elementary school was 350, a number that reached 421 students at the end of the year. The Jewish community of Tehran at that time was of about 6000 members. The same year the Alliance Israélite Universelle opened a girl school (with around 60 students) and evening classes for adults. In the beginning the language of instruction was French. During the reign of Reza Shah, the school passed under the control of Iran's ministry of education, and this obliged a change in the education methods of the school, putting more emphasis on the Persian language, history and literature. Before the establishment of the school, there was a *Maktab*, an educational institution for Jewish children, where Judaism was the primary source of education.

¹⁶⁸ Nourollah Khoramian, *Hekāyat beshnav az kāk-e mahalleh*.

two French. They were husband and wife, Madame Kohenka and Messieur Kohenka.¹⁶⁹

Haroun Yashayaei, in his book-memoire described the school as follow:

The school yard looked very big. The classrooms were arranged around a yard and the school was built of one floor and without any additional things in the structure. Every two classrooms were organized with one entry, with a few stairs and a small staircase; it is clear that in the crowded moments when entering and leaving the school, the students became human cans. To separate one class from the other there was only the staircase, so at the moment of the lesson and during the dictation, the students of each of the two classes could hear the voice of the teacher of the other class¹⁷⁰.

The school Etehād, which was inaugurated in 1898, opening «a spark of hope in the hearts of the Jews»¹⁷¹, witnessed the vicissitudes of the Iranian history of that period and the transformation of the Oudlājān community. The goal of the school was the «preparation of the students for a useful life in a non-Jewish society»¹⁷² and most of all, the spread of an education concerned more on scientific and modern issues than on religion. They were like «emissaries of western civilisation»¹⁷³ in what has been defined as a «backward and wild society»¹⁷⁴. It goes without saying that the Alliance brought a different set of values into the Jewish quarter promoting a modern and secularized education. This caused a profound change in the cultural education of the Jewish children of Sarechāl: first of all because the education of the Iranian Jews had always been set into two main elements, their 'Jewishness', which means their religious belief in Judaism, and their Iranianess, which marked their loyalty to their Persian heritage and culture. Moreover, before the establishment of the school there was a *maktab*¹⁷⁵, an educational institution for Jewish children, where Judaism was the primary source of education.

The school Etehād, apart from the traditional education, had a very important role in teaching the religious duties and prayers to Jewish children. For example, the boys were taught to chant the Torah and how to put the *tfilin*¹⁷⁶, which they had to put on for the first time during their Bar Mitzvah. Etehād was also an important place of gathering for the community, especially during the annual celebrations hosted at the school. In particular, there was a big celebration for the Bar Mitzvah, where the thirteen-year-old boys had to demonstrate their acquired skills in reading the Torah. These school celebrations were important moments of aggregation for

¹⁶⁹ Online interview with Mohsen, December 2020.

¹⁷⁰ My translation of Yashayaei, *Ruzi ke esm-e khod rā dānestam*, 19.

¹⁷¹ Levy, *Comprehensive History*, 466.

¹⁷² A. Netzer, Alliance Israélite Universelle, *Encyclopaedia Iranica* I, no. 8, 893-895. Available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/alliance-israelite-universelle>. Accessed on 4 January 2021.

¹⁷³ Cohen, *Iranian Jewry and the Educational Endeavours*, 18.

¹⁷⁴ Cohen refers the words of Sultana Aton, after three months in Tehran. Cohen, *Iranian Jewry and the Educational Endeavours*, 24.

¹⁷⁵ The word *maktab* derives from the Arabic verb *Kataba*, meaning 'to write'. In Arabic it is used more as a reference to an administrative office. In the Persian usage it indicates the old pre-primary and primary education institutions of Iran, which were administrated by clergies. They were elementary religious schools, and every religious community had their own.

¹⁷⁶ Leah R Baer, *Life's Event. Birt, Bar Mitzvah, Weddings and Burial Customs*, in in *Esther's Children; a Portrait of Iranian Jews*, ed. Houman Sarshar, (Beverly Hills, Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002), 314-333, esp. 317.

the community that gathered together to celebrate the new generations. During one of those important events, in 1957, hundreds of parents and children were poisoned by food: around 500-700 people got sick, while seven children died.¹⁷⁷

The school Etehād had also an annual program for girls, who had to sing for their parents and friends. In the academic year 1898-99, the number of students enrolled in elementary school was 350, a number that reach the 421 students at the end of the year. The Jewish community of Tehran at that time was of about 6000 members. The same year the Alliance Israélite Universelle opened a girl school (with around 60 students) and evening classes for adults. At the beginning the language of education was French, together with the educational system, which was based on French models. The school promoted only two hours a day of *fārsi*, while biblical and liturgical studies were studied just few hours per week. In the academic year 1913-1914, the number of female students reached the 190 units. In general, the goal of the girls' school was to educate young girls for their role within the family and the house. For that reason, it was common for them on Thursday to leave the school earlier in order to help their mothers prepare food for Shabbat. Later on, when social changes brought significance improvement on women's situation in Iran, these educated girls started their own career, most of all in the education sectors. After World War I the Jewish community of Tehran started opening new schools also out of the Jewish quarter, like the Cyrus school in north of Tehran in 1931.¹⁷⁸

Before the advent of Reza Shah in 1925, the central committee of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris, forced its teachers to introduce a new method of education, which was more focussed on teaching Judaism and also the Hebrew language to the Alliance students. In Tehran, where Hebrew was not spoken at all, especially not by young students, it has been difficult to import this new subject. In 1920-1921 Azizollana'im, president of the Zionist organization in Iran, sent a letter to the department of education and culture of the Zionist executive in London, demanding a new approach for the Alliance Israélite Universelle school in Tehran, asking to establish new nationalistic schools in the capital and to send new teachers. His words are clear: «only nationalist Hebrew teachers, who know how to speak Hebrew, can revitalize the Jewish people in Persia»¹⁷⁹.

The Zionist project in Persia suffered a setback with the reign of Reza Shah. As part of its nationalistic policy and with the aim of preserving national sovereignty, the Shah attempted to cut any Western interference in different aspects of the Iranian society. This affected, for example, the printing of Iranian money or the administration of the system of the telegraph.¹⁸⁰ This also included the removal of foreign associations and missionaries from the central administration of the Iranian schools. In this sense, also the Alliance Israélite Universelle school passed under the control of Iran's ministry of education, becoming a public school. This new situation obliged a change in the education methods of the school, putting more

¹⁷⁷ Isabelle Headrick, A Family in Iran: Women Teachers, Minority Integration, and Family Networks in the Jewish Schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Iran, 1900–1950, *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 10, no. 4 (2019), 307-322, esp. 316.

¹⁷⁸ This school was independent from the Alliance; the promotion of a new government education system was compatible with the nationalistic policies of Reza Shah and funded by the Ministry of Education.

¹⁷⁹ By 1872, women were also included in the Alliance teaching force. See: Cohen, *Iranian Jewry and the Educational Endeavours*, 20.

¹⁸⁰ See: Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

emphasis on Persian language, history and literature. Finally, after 1941, the school was completely removed from the jurisdiction of the central committee in Paris and came under the protection of different American Jewish Organizations, more closely linked to the government.

The political vicissitudes of the Ettehād school in Oudlājān were mostly unknown by its students, who share the beautiful memories of their daily life there. While Asal describes her school years as the *khandedārtarin* (funniest) of her childhood and therefore *farāmushneshandi*¹⁸¹ (unforgettable), Mohsen recalls:

My school time was great. Boys and girls were in separate classes and also two separates but very close buildings, since Ettehād had one school for girls and one for boys. I was in Alliance from the 1st until the 8th grade. Half of the students were from Sarechāl, this means Jewish inhabitants of Oudlājān, and half from outside the neighbourhood. There were also a lot of Muslims who attended our classes, I think around three to nine percent, depending on which classes, boys or girls. I also had few Muslim students in my class; they were students whose parents wanted for them a good education and Alliance could provide it to them, especially because they wanted them to learn French. They were sons and daughters of wealthy people of Tehran, like doctors and pharmacists. This because the school was very good, and we earned a complete education: we learnt a bit of Hebrew but also Arabic in order to be able to learn the Qoran. Both languages were mandatory as foreigner languages. Besides the other scientific subjects, which were considered very important, like physics and mathematics, we also learnt Persian literature. I am able to recite a lot of verses of Hafez. We had 16 subjects to study every week.¹⁸² We went to school five days per week from 8 to 5 in the afternoon¹⁸³.

All the places of memory that were reported in these pages have remained so indelible in people's memories because they are still symbolic of the entire community. Many of these places no longer exist today and others are completely in ruins. Some of them still exist, like the Ezra Yaghoub synagogue, thanks to the perseverance of men and women who continue to celebrate the Jewish festivities there. But memory is perhaps the holder of the most important role: not forgetting these places means making them immortal. Moreover, as argued by Pierre Nora, «memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects»¹⁸⁴. According to this definition, in Oudlājān memory reveals its true identity and value through these gestures and objects that were part of the daily-life in the quarter: the big and precious *samovar*, boiled for hours, the *tanur* (the oven), a perfect place for gathering especially during the long freezing evenings of Tehran, the loving care of the mothers of the quarter taking care of their family and children, the fathers working hard to give their children a better life than the one they had, and finally in the delicious *ash* (soups) prepared by grandmothers.

¹⁸¹ Interview with Asal, Tehran November 2019. My translation from Persian.

¹⁸² Some of the subjects included: arithmetic, local and world geography, local and world history, physical and natural sciences, linear design and, for girls, sewing.

¹⁸³ Online interview with Mohsen, December 2020.

¹⁸⁴ Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History*, 9.

1.7 Women of Oudlājān: a community life.

For the Jewish dwellers, Oudlājān represented everything: the place of family, friendship, community, and alliance; and, most of all, it was «the hub of their social activities and the centre of their entire community»¹⁸⁵. Women and men of Oudlājān were capable of creating a strong sense of community and belonging to the quarter, which was influenced by the interaction of different factors. As we have already mentioned, the historical path of Oudlājān was the distinctive feature of the quarter in comparison to other Jewish quarters in Iran. Moreover, this deep sense of community was due to the particular characteristic of the Iranian ‘*mahalleh*’, perceived as a distinctive social unit, which included individuals with analogous cultural, religious and ethnic characteristics. As argued by Pirnazar «on the cultural landscape of Iran, the *mahalleh*¹⁸⁶ has always represented an incommensurable sphere of existence of the ‘other’, untouched by mainstream society and unfamiliar even to the integrated Iranian Jews of the 1960s».¹⁸⁷ Moreover, Sarechāl was located in a small area of the quarter and this was another element that favoured the relationship between the Jewish dwellers and the birth of a deep sense of community, a sentiment that, using the words of Mc Millan, can be defined as a feeling that members have of belonging, a «feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together».¹⁸⁸

The sharing of the same religious values and principles was one of the most important aspects which determined this strong sentiment of cohesion between all the dwellers. For them, religion meant belonging and at the same time also existence, as persons and as members of a community. The social value of being a religious community became even more important in a society like the Iranian one, which is based on differences. It meant expressing oneself as a collectivity and as a community asserting personal rights and grievances. In this sense, Judaism was, undoubtedly, a mean of solidarity within the Jewish community of Oudlājān. As argued by Soomekh, this specific sense of community was built mostly on the observance of Jewish holidays, and on the fact that these celebrations were a big event for the dwellers.¹⁸⁹ For women, religion had an even deeper social value that affected not only the private and family sphere, but also their public role. Indeed, as argued by Dallalfar, women were «important conveyors of Jewish tradition»¹⁹⁰ both in the public sphere and privately at home. In fact, as it will be analysed later, the woman had the role of educator of religion for their children. In the Oudlājān environment it was therefore the mother who had the task of introducing her children to the religious community, as future members.

¹⁸⁵ Loeb, *Jewish Life*, 73.

¹⁸⁶ She uses the word ‘*mahalleh*’ in its historical sense, as an area of a city specifically related to a community that was socially and spatially bound.

¹⁸⁷ Jaleh Pirnazar, *Voices of Marginality: Diversity in Jewish Iranian Women's Memoirs and Beyond*, in *The Jews of Iran: The History, Religion, and Culture of a Community in the Islamic World*, ed. Houman Sarshar (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), 191-202, esp. 191.

¹⁸⁸ David McMillan & David Chavis, *Sense of community: A definition and theory*, *Journal of Community Psychology* 14, no. 1, (January, 1986): 6-23, esp. 9.

¹⁸⁹ Saba Soomekh, *From the Shahs to Los Angeles: Three Generations of Iranian Jewish Women between Religion and Culture*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁹⁰ Arlene Dallalfar, *Worlds Apart; Mothers, Daughters and Family Life*, ed. Houman Sarshar, *Esther's Children; a Portrait of Iranian Jews*, (Beverly Hills: Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002): 403-414, esp. 408.

1.7.1 *The way of living*

All the conditions described above, stimulated the birth of a great and deep sense of community especially between the women of Oudlājān. Indeed, the quarter was, for women, a «space of collective identity»¹⁹¹, marked by a specific way of living where there was not a division between the public and the private sphere. This condition was mostly due to the continuous social relations built among the Jewish dwellers, especially women, by the «frequent patronage of local shops, socializing on sidewalks or in the market».¹⁹² Moreover, the streets of Sarechāl functioned as a *continuum* of the private house, as an extension of it: this was related to the fact that the doors of the houses of the quarter were always opened.¹⁹³ This perception of Oudlājān as a community space, as argued by the respondents, was due to the sociological organization of the quarter, its cultural forms and to the traditions that were perpetrated inside. This feature was intensified by the fact that one of the main aspects of life in the quarter was the living conditions of the house where a multigenerational family had to live together.

Mohsen remembers:

I have beautiful memories of four or five families living all together in one single house. The structure and the internal organization of these houses were always the same in all the quarter: each family had one big room while the kitchen was in common. In the entire house there was only one toilette that everybody used and one reservoir of water; everybody had the task to go down two floors to get the water. During my childhood in Oudlājān I lived in two different houses. One right to what was called *hafte-ye kenise* and later, at the age of 9, I moved to *kuche-ye darakhti*, which was also in Oudlājān but a bit farther way. Both homes had the same situation¹⁹⁴.

Sara recalls:

I remember my house and the houses of my friends. This is a bittersweet memory for me. I spent my childhood with a lot of children because each family in my house had around three or four children. I grow up with all these kids all together and we had a lot of fun. For us, as children, this situation was easy and happy. I think that for my mother and my father it was harder. It is true that they were used to that situation because this has been our traditional way of living for generations. But they also knew that this was made now mostly for necessity. They dreamt of a different life for us. Indeed, when we left the quarter, we bought a house just for us¹⁹⁵.

This specific way of living shaped Oudlājān as a familiar place especially for women, who were integral part of this lively life of the neighbourhood. In fact, once again the most difficult role in this situation was up to women: namely the maintenance of serenity and family unity. In this regard, as specified by Dallalfar, woman's role «was to maintain family alliances and strong social relations within

¹⁹¹ Mills, *Streets of Memory*, 139.

¹⁹² Amy Mills, *Streets of Memory*, 139.

¹⁹³ This was referred by Ansal, personal interview, Tehran November 2019. My translation from Persian.

¹⁹⁴ Personal online interview, December 2020.

¹⁹⁵ Sari, personal interview. Tehran November 2019. My translation from Persian.

the extended family»¹⁹⁶, following a social system which was common all over Iran and dominant in all families.

This imposed condition determined a strong sense of unity among the women of the extended family, even though sometimes the relationship between them was not easy, as Goldin tells us in her book *Wedding song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman*¹⁹⁷. This because, as she argued in our interview, «the women, especially the elders' power in society came from their control over other women, matchmaking, setting boundaries»¹⁹⁸. As stated by Arnazar, grandmothers had the role of matriarch, «heading the household, enjoying respect from their sons and many others within the *mahalleh*».¹⁹⁹

Anyway, women, who were forced to live together, could create their own life, helping each other and gathering in the place of the home which was the most common for them. All the memories the respondents have of the women's community are in the kitchen and in the courtyard, around the *taanoor* in wintertime.

1.7.2 *The hammām*

Another important place for socializing was the *hammām* - the public bathroom. During the first half of the century in Sarechāl there were three different bathhouses. The first bath, the *hammām-e Asāow*, was located around the Sarechāl area, in the middle of the Jewish neighborhood, while another one, known as the *hammām-e Zakhrun*, was located in the proximity of the Oudlājān market, next to the Ezrā Yaghoub synagogue. The most famous one, frequented by the prosperous Jews of the Oudlājān neighbourhood, was the *hammām-e Hakim*, located in a little alley to the east, towards Takayi Razaqilikhan and Cyrus Street.²⁰⁰ The existing public baths were located in the basement at a distance of twelve metres from the aqueduct, with approximately fifteen or twenty steps down the basement, on the ground level. It goes without saying that the number of stairs and steep slopes was often problematic for the elderly and for pregnant women and even children, and occasionally caused disasters.²⁰¹

In 1947, Suleiman Seneh, son of al-Azar, who worked in a currency exchange business and was also a shareholder in a sweater factory, opened a new and modern bath in Sarechāl, called *hammām-e Keshvarieh*²⁰². He was yielding to the desire of his beloved late wife Khodād. The water was supplied from the aqueduct of Haji Alireza and stored in the water below the basement of the bath and transported by a pump. From this source, separate hot and cold-water pipes were routed to showers and other parts of the bathroom.²⁰³ The working hours of the *hammām* was scheduled to serve both men and women. The time destined for men was from early morning, from the beginning of the sound of the bathing chicken, until eight o'clock.

¹⁹⁶ Dallalfar, *Worlds Apart*, 405.

¹⁹⁷ Farideh, *Wedding Song*.

¹⁹⁸ Online interview with Farideh Goldin, January 2020.

¹⁹⁹ Pirnazar, *Voices of Marginality*, 193.

²⁰⁰ From my translation of 7dorim.com-hammām-e Keshvarie. Accessed on 9 April 2020. See also: Mereu, *Oudlājān Memories*.

²⁰¹ 7dorim.com-hammām-e Keshvarie

²⁰² The bath was closed in 1980 and reopened in 1991. It was closed in 2006 and for a long period remained in a state of neglect. Now, it is under renovation, and it is now registered as an Iranian Cultural Heritage.

²⁰³ 7dorim.com-hammām-e Keshvarie

The rest of the day was reserved for women. On Wednesday, the *hammām* was reserved all day for the women of Sarechāl. In a few years, this bath became one of the most favourite of the women of the community because of its exquisite and raffinate design: the walls were covered with turquoise tiles, while the ceiling was decorated with stained glasses. In the centre of the bath, there was a marble shady fountain.

All these baths have witnessed the most important life events of the female component of the Jewish community of Tehran, especially its growth. The bath was not only a place for gathering, chatting, and gossiping, but had a central role in the ritual of the marriage, especially in determining the positivity of the girl, who had been chosen as a future bride. Moreover, it was the moment for the mother of the future groom to gather information about the family of the bride. During the most important official social gatherings, women had also the role to raise money for the Jewish community. During these meetings they also used to host some female instructors who could teach them Judaism.

People still remember this place with pleasant joy and gratitude, because many wedding baths were held in this beautiful *hammām*. Once again, a place that is now in ruins, is part of a play of memories that traces the history of Oudlājān and preserves the story of the Jews who used to live there.

1.8 Women of Oudlājān: A domestic and family life.

The Oudlājān neighbourhood had an important role in the construction of the Iranian Jewish identity also within the members of the female component of the Tehrani community. The story of Oudlājān and the impact of the quarter in women's life is essential to understand the history of Jewish women in twentieth-century Iran. As Massey argues,²⁰⁴ generally speaking, women's sense of place and perspective is different from a man one, because the spaces through which she normally moves is different, together with her connections with the outside. Similarly, in Oudlājān and in general in Tehran, Jewish women and men grew up with personalities affected by different boundary experiences and concerns with different relational issues. Moreover, from the thirties, men started working outside the Jewish quarter, so they began having relations with the outside world, whereas for women the quarter remained the centre of their daily life for many years afterward.

1.8.1 The house

One of the most important aspect of women's life in Oudlājān was their strong identification with the quarter. In the relationship between women and the neighbourhood, the double nature of Oudlājān is revealed, both as a space for stability and as a space for marginalization, often desired and sought after. In fact, the woman was also responsible for the house, shopping and gardening, all activities related to the domestic dimension. Indeed, during the first half of the twentieth century in Oudlājān women performed only a domestic life, while their home was the centre of their daily routine and the quarter the centre of their entire life. The outside Tehran was gendered because there was a distinction between the

²⁰⁴ Massey Doreen, *Space, Place, and Gender*, (New edition ed., University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

public and the private sphere and a consequent confinement of women into the quarter and then into the home. Inside Oudlājān this division between the private and the public space did not exist, and the streets of the quarter were closely linked with the home, as an extension of the family sphere. In this respect, Oudlājān was functioning as a link between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere. Moreover, Tehran outside the familiarity of the quarter was perceived only as a city for men and more specifically Muslim men. The respondents highlighted that, outside Oudlājān, Jewish men enjoyed more freedom, especially from religious prescriptions. On the contrary, inside their home they lived under the tight control of women who were, using an expression of Najmabadi, the *mudabbir-e manzil*²⁰⁵ (manager of the house).

The crucial role of women within the family sphere and the fact that their daily life was devoted to the care of the extended family, could be easily recognized through the memories that the respondents shared with me. In these memories mothers and grandmothers are described in their daily practices, mostly cooking. In this regard, it can be stated that the women of Sarechāl were, borrowing an expression from the work of McDowell, the «angels of the home»²⁰⁶, a place which was the idealized centre for their emotional, practical, and religious life. Home was more «than a physical structure. It was for women a site of lived relationship [...] a key link in their relationship between material culture and sociality»²⁰⁷. This link between women and the house is a common feature in Jewish religion²⁰⁸, also considering the words of Rabbi Yosei who stated «I have never called my wife my wife, but rather my home»²⁰⁹

Almost every respondent recalled the memories of their mothers within the house. The mothers and the house represented for them a sanctuary of salvation and a lifeline of hope. In this regard, «as a place of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear, the home is invested with meanings, emotions, experiences, and relationships that live at the heart of human life»²¹⁰. In our case we do not have to identify home just as a gendered construction, where women were confined and alienated. As the feminist Iris Marion Young argues, the association of home as a value is ambivalent because the concept of home is constructed as a place of confinement for women.²¹¹ This idea of confinement could not completely apply for the women of Oudlājān who, as we already argued, were perfectly integrated in the outside space of their houses, the quarter. Moreover, for the women of Oudlājān the house was more than a physical structure, since it

²⁰⁵ Afsaneh Najmabadi. *Crafting an Educated Housewife in Iran.*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton University Press, 1998): 91-125, esp. 91

²⁰⁶ Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 75.

²⁰⁷ McDowell, *Gender, Identity, and Place*, 92.

²⁰⁸ As specified by my interviewees this was a common feature of many religions in Iran at the time. In fact, the conception of women as tied to the home was also typical of Muslims and Christians.

²⁰⁹ Palomba Laura, La questione femminile nella cultura ebraica contemporanea tra comunitarismo e liberalismo, *Annali. Della facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Cagliari* XX, no. LVII (2002), 289-338, esp. 291.

²¹⁰ Alison Blunt and Ann Varley, Geographies of Home, *Cultural Geographies* 11, no. 1 (January 2004): 3-6, esp. 3.

²¹¹ Iris Marion Young, House and home. Feminist variations on a theme, ed. S. Hardy and C. Wiedmer, *Motherhood and space: Configurations of the maternal through politics, home and the body*, (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 115-148, esp. 115.

represented «both a place of meaning and a site of resistance».²¹² Home was the place that forged women’s memories and the centre of women existence. As a place more emotional than physical, home was the place «where a variety of relationships, emotions, meanings, values, cultural and religious practices are played out»²¹³. As specified by De Groot: «While framed by conventions which based women within households and emphasised male authority and protection, it was possible for women to manage and manipulate these spatial conventions in pursuit of their own agendas».²¹⁴

The experience of the women of Oudlajan helps us once again to overcome the idea of ‘home’ as a simplistic notion of women’s confinement. Indeed, as argued by De Groot, who talks about the experience of women in Iran, «it is unhelpful to see the house holds which were central to women’s lives as simply ‘domestic’ spaces when in fact they were sites of productive, creative, and service work, as well as of social networking among neighbours, patrons, and clients with all its political and cultural meanings»²¹⁵.

1.8.2 The family

Family was at the heart of women’s lives. Women were working hard, and they rarely stopped cooking, cleaning, and taking care of others, especially children and the elderly. Shahrazād during our interview, continued to remember the fundamental role of her mother inside her family life and above all her devotion to her children. Spelling out the words in Persian, she recited:

*Dastam begereft va pā be pā bord
Tā shive-ye rāh raftan āvārd,
Tā hastam va hast
Dāram-esh dust*²¹⁶.

Women were responsible for the education of their children, responsible for their actions and even for their trouble, as Haroon says in his book. But, according to his words, mothers were deprived of a great privilege: they could not choose the names of their children in the birth certificate. This was, indeed, a task and a privilege reserved only to fathers: this was, Haroun argues, one of the many benefits of patriarchy in Jewish culture (*mazāiāi-ye pedarsālāri*)²¹⁷. As he explained, the common practice was that the father gave his son an official name, which was also written in the birth certificate (*shenāsnāme*), but of which no one knew the identity and often the existence. Mothers and children themselves were not aware of this. Indeed, at home, among family and friends, an *esme kuchak* (nickname) was used

²¹² Ali Watson, Home, In Peace and Conflict Studies: A Site of Resistance and of Reform, *Peace and Conflict Studies* 26, no. 1, (2019), 1-20, esp. 2.

²¹³ Watson, Home, 6. This is a very important point, as it shows the limits of white feminism: Iranian (Jewish) women had a different trajectory that also allowed them agency, not just confinement.

²¹⁴ Joanna De Groot, The Space of Gender and the Gender of Space: some Thoughts from a Historian of Nineteenth Century Iran, paper presented at VIII Congresso della Società Italiana delle Storie 2021, June 9, 2021.

²¹⁵ De Groot, The Space of Gender.

²¹⁶ My translation from Persian: She took my hand and took me step by step and taught me how to walk. As long as I will be and she will be here, I will love her. Personal interview, Rome, January 2020. The words are part of the poem *Mādar* by Iraj Mirza. The term ‘*āvārd*’, which is used by Shahrazād, does not appear in the poem of Iraj Mirza. He used the term ‘*āmukht*’.

²¹⁷ My translation of Yashayaei, *Ruzi ke esm-e khod rā dānestam*, 20.

instead of the official name. Haroun titled the second chapter of his memoirs in Oudlājān in a meaningful way, *ruzi ke esme khod rā dāshtam*, the day I got my name. The chapter tells of his first day of school, in the famous Ettehād, in the *madrese-ye ettehād pāiin* (the school of the Alliance to the south of Tehran)²¹⁸. That day, during the students' registration, he became aware of his real name, the one mentioned in his birth certificate. Therefore, he says:

Like the other students, I was ready to listen to the voice of the recording woman, who was taking attendance of the students. At some time, she started calling a boy whose name was 'Haroon' but no one moved from his place. Once again, the woman's voice pronounced that name 'Haroon'. Once again no one reacted. The woman, who was then particularly angry, with an even stronger voice asked, 'Who is this Haroun Yashayae?' My mother, who knew our family name, went in front of the woman, and whispered 'Madam, we are the Yashayae family, but my son's name is Parviz'. The lady replied 'Madam, in the certificate it is written Haroun.' My mother turned to me and said: 'Who gave you this name? From the first moment we called you Parviz!' I was myself too speechless because I had always heard myself called Parviz.²¹⁹

When the baby was born, the father had chosen an official name, which was Haroun, an important name of Jewish origin.²²⁰ While inside the family everyone called him Parviz, a Persian name meaning 'fortunate', 'victorious'.

In this regard, the words of Roja Hakakian are particularly important: «motherhood as a melancholy affair. Mothers were martyrs. Men suffered and sacrificed themselves only in poetry for the sake of love. In real life, women were the ones who perform those legendary acts»²²¹.

1.8.3 Women and the religious sphere

The role of the women of Oudlājān was centred on the home and on the family. This approach was also visible in the religious sphere: women were excluded from studies of the *Turāt* (Torah) and other traditional Jewish texts and from synagogue's attendance. In this sense, it can be argued that the synagogue was more a 'male' space and also a place of gathering for the male community. At the same time, everything related to the study of religious dogma was a 'male' affair. Haroun in his book memoir reports that the young males of the neighbourhood were engaged in two main activities, namely business and the study of the sacred texts. He reports that as a sign of maturity they used to do business on their own to avoid being unemployed or tied to their father's work. A young man was considered mature when he was able to provide for himself the sustenance for his marriage, which had usually already been arranged by his family when he was younger. Their intellectual concern was to learn some Hebrew in order to be able to read the *Turāt* and recite the psalms of David. Knowing how to recite well the sacred texts, which the young boys used to learn in the synagogue or in the family, was considered a sign of their glorification and greatness.²²² On the contrary, the role of women in the religious sphere may be synthetized in two great areas: the first one is the material sphere,

²¹⁸ Ibidem

²¹⁹ Ivi, p. 20-21.

²²⁰ Haroun the prophet, brother of Moses.

²²¹ Goldin, *Wedding Song*, 75.

²²² My translation of Yashayaei, *Ruzi ke esm-e khod rā dānestam*, 15.

including family care and protection, in which women were imprisoned²²³; the other one, the spiritual sphere, is related to the studying and the religious participation from which women were excluded.²²⁴ Shahrazād, remembering her childhood, confided that she was upset of this situation of segregation and she said:

When we went to Oudlājān during the Jewish festivities, I forced my father to bring me to the synagogue with him. People had a very big consideration of his role, as he was a diplomat for the Pahlavi, so they did not pay attention on me walking around the synagogue and attending the ceremonies. In the meanwhile, my mother was busy preparing good foods with her sisters.²²⁵

In general, the role of women related to the religious sphere was focussed on those responsibilities related to the care of the family, including the first education of their children to religious values. Shahrazād, argues: «It was on our mothers that our education and above all our religious education depended».²²⁶ Eitan, recalling the role of his mother in his religious life, states:

The role of the mother in the religious life of the children is so fundamental that there are specific praises and poems that are read on Friday evening during the Shabbat in honour of women. It is the mother who plays a fundamental role inside the Jewish family. These mothers have kept the religious traditions so strong in Iran²²⁷.

Moreover, women had specific duties related to maintaining the Jewish dietary law (*kashrut*) in their own home and other domestic ritual observances. At a physical level, Soomekh argues «that meant that they were responsible for purchasing groceries, cooking, cleaning, and maintaining a Jewish home»²²⁸. As argued by Palomba, a Jewish woman, in every community, was educated in this role of mother and guide through various rabbinic teachings. These teachings framed woman completely in the family sphere. «The woman, watching over the observance of food and Shabbat laws, on the purity of the family and children's education, observing the duty of hospitality and all those duties of love and charity towards the neighbours, guarantees the observance and the religiosity of those who live in the house».²²⁹

During the most important Jewish ceremonies, women did not have any official religious role within the community, but their experience was undoubtedly essential in the organization of the event and on the excellent success of it. For example, during the *Brit Milah* (the ritual circumcision), the ceremony was held at the parents' home on the eighth day after the birth of the baby boy. The ceremony required a huge preparation of the house, which had to welcome all the guests, the

²²³ This is referred of how Jewish women experienced the confinement back then.

²²⁴ Palomba, *La questione femminile*, 296.

²²⁵ Personal interview. Rome January 2020. My translation from Persian.

²²⁶ Personal interview with Shehrazād, Rome January 2020. My translation from Persian.

²²⁷ Personal interview with Eitan, Rome September 2019. My translation from Italian.

²²⁸ Saba Soomekh, *Iranian Jewish Women: Domesticating Religion and Appropriating Zoroastrian Religion in Ritual Life*, *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 18, (2009): 13-38, esp. 17.

²²⁹ From my translation of Ernest Gughenheim, *L'ebraismo nella vita quotidiana*, tr.it a cura di V. Lucattini Vogelmann, (Firenze: La Giuntina, 1994), 48.

rabbi and most important the *sandali-ye elyāhu hannāvi* (Prophet Elijah's chair)²³⁰. This latter was commonly held at the *kenise*, in the synagogue of Ezra Yaghoub for the Sarechāl community. During the ceremony, women were responsible of the refreshment following the circumcision: dried fruits and nuts were the most common served food. During the seven mourning days following the death of a relative or friends, called *haft ruz* in Persian and *shiva* in Hebrew, women were also engaged on the preparation of the meals destined to the mourners. Moreover, for the first year of the period following the death, the female relatives of the deceased had the duty of wearing black clothes and were excluded from the participation to any social event where there was music or any kind of entertainment.²³¹ During the Bar Mitzvah food was served all night, especially sweets and hot tea from a big and precious *samovar*²³². The role of women on the religious sphere within the community would have a great importance for the future of the community of the Tehrani Jews. The capability of those women to «cultivate religious lives by turning their day-to day profane activities into sacred acts»²³³ would contribute to the protection and safeguard of the Tehrani Jews' community during the secularization policy of the Pahlavi.

1.8.4 *The life in the quarter: Kucheh-ye Haft Kenise*

The daily life of women in Oudlājān was mostly spent cooking for the extended family and the day always started with the grocery. Dorit remembers:

We had to worry about breakfast as soon as we woke up, since most food had to be purchased before a meal. Then we had to stay in long lines at the bakery at lunch time and again for dinner. Bread was a main staple of Iranian food. For most of my life in Iran, we did not have a refrigerator or a toaster oven. One of us had to run to bakery and wait in line for fresh bread. Someone ran to the store to purchase eggs, butter, and yoghurt.²³⁴

Kucheh-ye Haft Kenise (Seven Synagogue Street)²³⁵, one of the first Jewish concentration points of Oudlājān with seven synagogues and more than thirty-five houses all around, was the centre of the quarter and, consequently, of women's life.

For everyone, this street is still today a symbol of the entire old community; all the stories, which took place all around the area, represent today a public memory which needs to be preserved for the salvation of the old community and the safeguard of Jewish traditions in the capital. Tracing the outlines of the neighbourhood on an old map of Tehran, Sari, during our interview, often lingered on that street, remembering *Kucheh-ye Haft Kenise* as the place where children used to play, especially during Tehran's hot summer when the sun, for the conformity of the quarter, did not reach the street. All Saturdays, as she recalls, the street was a

²³⁰ Elijah, a Jewish biblical figure, is considered the guardian of the child during the ritual of circumcision. The chair is also called *takth-e milla* (circumcision seat). In the past in Iran, the chair stayed in the synagogue and was brought to the family of the child during the circumcision ceremony.

²³¹ Baer, *Life's Event*, 333.

²³² A metal container traditionally used to heat and boil water.

²³³ Soomekh, *Iranian Jewish Women: Domesticating Religion*, 15.

²³⁴ Personal online interview with Dorit, January 2021.

²³⁵ The street was renamed *Kucheh-ye Haft Masjed* (Seven Mosque Street) after the 1979 Revolution. Currently there are neither synagogues nor mosques on it.

hectic bustle of people: men were going to attend the Shabbat ceremony at their own synagogue and children were playing on the ground. The smell of food, prepared the day before by women, was all over the street.

Mohsen, who used to live in that street, remembers:

The best memory I have of Sarechāl is my childhood, spent on *Kucheh-ye Haft Kenise*. I grew up there together with all the kids in the area. In the *Kucheh-ye Haft Kenise* everybody had a lot of fun, especially playing volleyball. From there we used to walk all together to the Ettehād school, which was half an hour walk from our houses [...] After school, we always got together in somebody's house, to eat and to study. Occasionally we also were at my house, with other three or four boys. So, after school, from five until eight we were again together, studying our lecture. And after that, it was suddenly time to go to bed²³⁶.

All the interviewees mentioned this street while recalling their memories of Oudlājān. Some have lived there for years before moving to less densely populated areas of the neighbourhood, others played here all evenings with their friends, and others accompanied their mothers here for their moments of shopping. Indeed, *Kucheh-ye Haft Kenise* was an obliged passage for women's daily routine of grocery: all the stores, butchers and food vendors were around this area.

In the quarter there were two small bazaars: one was named Timcheh Ayoub and the other Moshe Mikhael. As referred by Nourollah Khoramian «the former was a source for local buyers and sellers (it had small stores), while the latter was a Mosafer Khaneh (literally house of travellers, an inn where travellers used to spend the night), which was actually more profitable than the stores».²³⁷ Mohsen remembers that inside the two Jewish bazaars of Oudlājān there was almost everything: butcher shops, groceries, chicken shops and a pharmacy. Something that they missed was a bakery where to buy fresh bread; for that, they used to go to the Muslim bazaar which was located just outside the perimeter of the neighbourhood.²³⁸

Amram Sabizi-Foroush and Ahaim Mollah were two other famous sellers. *Aghā Haim Eshagh-e Baghāl*²³⁹ had a small grocery store that sold various daily necessities, while Davoud-e *Anari* was selling pomegranate. Rahim *Baghāl*, who had his house not far from the *Kenise-ye Khāleh*, was selling the delicious *panir-e kashk*, which was mainly used as a topping for the *ash* (soup), «the most favourite food of Oudlājān».²⁴⁰ The *panir-e kashk* was made of «plain yogurt that would be left to dry in the sun, with salt added so that it would not spoil. The remaining thick

²³⁶ Personal online interview. December 2020.

²³⁷ From the poem of Nourollah Khoramian, *Oh Hear the Story of Mahalleh Palace* Los Angeles, 1992, translated into English prose.

²³⁸ Personal online interview, December 2020.

²³⁹ The Jews (like the other Iranians at that time) did not have official permanent surnames until the 1930s when Reza Shah, as part of his modernization process, required also the Jews to register with a surname. Until that time the majority of the Jewish families had personal nicknames, the majority of which were derived from their occupation. Many choose surnames which remembered their family origins. Most of them started using names with Hebrew origins which were Persianized by adding some suffixes, loaned from the Persian language. For example, Yan (which is the plural form of many Persian surnames) or *zada* (which means son). It was very common to use the given name Abraham, which, according to the Persian pronunciation, became Abrahamian.

²⁴⁰ Personal online interview with Mohsen, December 2020.

yogurt would be mixed again with a bit of water and added to cooked ash and various other dishes».²⁴¹

1.9 Oudlājān after the war: a quarter of new opportunities

In Oudlājān a woman's life was in general marked by a strong gender differentiation. It was entirely devoted to motherhood, whereas men used to work outside their houses. For young girls of the quarter the passage to the age of maturity and responsibility was the passage to motherhood, which represented, until the first half of the twentieth century, the one and only possibility. Over the course of the century, in particular after the 1940s, the situation of the women of Oudlājān changed with regard to their role outside the family.

1.9.1 *The social context*

This important change has been influenced by different factors. First of all, the historical context of Tehran in that period need to be taken into consideration. Indeed, since the advent of Reza Shah, the Iranian capital started a vast urban expansion; this urbanization provided a net growth in terms of economic, social and cultural development, which influenced the daily life of Tehrani women. For the first time, they started attending universities and entering the labour market. The second aspect is related to the new government approach towards women, which had a strong impact in urban areas like Tehran. As I will examine later on, this new approach affected also Oudlājān. even though less strongly than in the city at large. Generally speaking, the Shah's policy at that time (first under Reza Shah and then under Mohammad Reza Shah), was aimed at building a national state based on Western values, such as progress and modernity. This process aimed also at improving the position of women in the Iranian society; promoting women's emancipation was, from a Western ideology, one of the ways through which reach the coveted modernity. For the first time, woman's emancipation was considered the main aspect of the progress of the Iranian State, and it started being regulated by a specific gender policy, which was focussed on two main areas of interest: women's social participation, with the promotion of women's employment, and women's role in the family sphere.²⁴² Regarding this second aspect, the changes brought by the Shah did not have great effects on the status of women in the family. This was due to different reasons. First of all, women's life was focussed only on the family for cultural reasons. The strong system of values related to motherhood and family was rooted in the society, and also in and inside the Oudlājān quarter. Moreover, from a legal point of view, the provisions related to the family were still regulated by the Sharia Law. The Iranian Civil Code, adopted in 1931 under Reza Shah, consisted of 100 articles related to the family.²⁴³ In article 1105 the husband was defined the head of the household, with all the responsibilities related to the care of the family and of the wife. Article 1169 provided that the mother was responsible for the children until the coming of age seven for girls and age two for boys, when they passed under the custody of the fathers. In 1933 Iranian religious

²⁴¹ From the poem of Nouroollah Khoramian, *Oh Hear the Story of Mahalleh Palace* Los Angeles, 1992, translated into English prose.

²⁴² Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 103-104.

²⁴³ Ivi, p. 110.

minorities obtained the right to apply their own personal laws for everything related to the family and personal issues.

As mentioned before, the national progress promoted by the two Pahlavi had to be achieved through «the legal construction of women as social participants, educated mothers and subservient wives»²⁴⁴. For this reason, this policy was not actually able to bridge the gap of power between men and women. This specifically with regards to women's role in Oudlājān that continued to be focussed on the cure of the family, albeit we can highlight that the women of the quarter had been through a lot of change in that period. These important changes mainly concern the working environment and could be achieved also thanks to the help of various Jewish women associations, which operated in Oudlājān in that period.

Especially after the Second World War and the advent of Mohammed Reza, women started improving their status while working outside their houses (but still protected inside the quarter). Nonetheless, they were still confined to feminine professions, like midwifery, nurses, and teachers. Even though the gender's policy did not affect uniformly the whole country and was more focussed on the emancipation of women from the urban upper class, I can analyse a little but significant change in the labour market also in Oudlājān. From the memories that people shared with me, I have observed that this important change in women's life was, especially at the beginning, welcomed as negative, specifically by the elders. In some cases, women were driven to work out of necessity, as in the case of Mohsen's mother. Indeed, after her husband's death, she was forced to go to work, even though she had never done it before. It was particularly difficult for her to leave her family and her home and delegate the care of the house and the children to the grandmother. The intimacy of the family fireside, as Mohsen recalls, was disrupted by this event.

1.9.2 Associations operating in the quarter.

The women of Oudlājān were often hesitant in starting to work, because they thought that this could negatively affect their role as wives and mothers, especially for their role as educators of their own children. Anyway, some women during the 1950s started opening their own businesses inside Oudlājān. Shahrazād's aunt, for example, opened a distillery in the neighbourhood, where she distilled *gol* (rose) and *bid* (willow), this latter a long, fragrant, leafless berry. Shahrazād remembers: «She made an excellent distillate of willow and roses, the scent of which hovered throughout the neighbourhood».²⁴⁵

In order to cope with the new needs of the working women, the Iranian Jewish Women's organization (*Sāzemān- e bānvān-e yahudi-ye Irān*)²⁴⁶ opened a day care centre (nursery) in Oudlājān.

Its aim was to support working mothers with their daily needs and to help women approaching the labour market by providing them with concrete support. In particular, it was opened in order to help working mothers who had no one to keep their children in the daytime. This phenomenon started increasing especially during

²⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 111.

²⁴⁵ Personal interview of January 2020, Rome. My translation from Persian.

²⁴⁶ The association was created in 1947 in Tehran. The founders were Parvin Hakim, Iran Navi, Shamsi Hekmat and Maliheh Kashfi, Iran Moradof, Esther Moreh, Esther Harounof, Sharifeh Naim, Gina Shalom. Overtime, many other Jewish women, especially from the middle-class, joined the association. Thanks to the help of other philanthropic organizations, the Iranian Jewish Ladies Associations could open new branches in other different Iranian cities, like Hamedan, Arak, Shiraz, Isfahan, and Abadan.

the 1950s, when the Jewish community of Oudlājān started abandoning the quarter for grater Tehran. In a short time, the daily care centre grew further to meet the increasing needs of the working women of Oudlājān. They started with only twenty-five/thirty children, but then the number grew, and the daily care centre was expanded in two larger buildings, one inside Oudlājān and the other just outside, in Cyrus Street.²⁴⁷ The nurseries were also responsible to give bath to the children two days a week. The two nurseries, which were opened from 8.30 to about 17 o'clock, were responsible to keep children from 3 to 6 all day long and «to nurture their physical, social, hygienic, and nutritional growth».²⁴⁸

The Iranian Jewish women association's activity was fundamental in Oudlājān to help mothers and children of the quarter in different sectors, while providing, first of all, an economic support for the poor Jewish families. For example, the organization cooperated also in children's lunch programme of the students of the Ettehād school. Every day few members of the organization took turn to supervise the lunch service. Minou Soomekh Michlin remembers:

My earliest memories of the association go back to my childhood. I was seven or eight when my sister and my mother, Touba Soumekh, joined the association's Board of Directors. I have vivid memories of the children's lunch program. The Alliance School of the Jewish neighbourhood offered lunch at school and the association members took turns every day to supervise the lunchroom and attend to the children. About that time, the 'Well Baby Clinic' was launched. This program was meant to help mams and babies with their hygienic and health care needs. One evening, my mother told us about her day at the Alliance. She was supervising the day's lunch at the school, when she saw a boy pour the rice into his pocket. 'Dear, why do you do that?' she asked. 'My mam is hungry at home' the boy said, 'I'm taking this to her'.²⁴⁹

The association was indeed created in 1947 with the aim of finding a solution for the Jewish community. The documentary for the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the association reports this interesting memory:

Ten of us young Jewish women sat around an old table in a room at Kurosh school, in Hatef street. We wondered how to get things started. The night was cold. The power was out. We had lit a small candle to shed a light on our weary faces. The wind blew through a broken pane and threatened the little flame. I told my friends: 'we've come together to do something good. If this candle defies the wind to the end, if it keeps shining, then we will succeed, and we'll know that God will bless us'.²⁵⁰

The association gave a great support to the women of the quarter also from a cultural perspective. Indeed, one of its most important projects was the preparation and publication of the Jewish Women's Prayer Book in Persian. The book, which was published to overcome the language gap between women and man and favoured the

²⁴⁷ The daily care is still active today, even though the majority of the children are from non-Jewish families.

²⁴⁸ Memories of Minou Soomekh Michlin, as reported in the Ijwo 70 years of Service – A documentary film.

²⁴⁹ Memories of Minou Soomekh Michlin, as reported in the Ijwo 70 years of Service – A documentary film

²⁵⁰ Ijwo 70 years of Service – A documentary film.

access of women to the religious sphere, gave women access to the «true meaning of Judaism»²⁵¹ from which they were excluded until that time. The publication of the book put forward one of the «most important steps taken to this date»²⁵² for the emancipation of women in the religious sphere. Regarding other cultural projects, Minou Soomekh Michlin recalls:

We also translated children's book into Persian. We had the text typed out, and we pasted it over the English parts of illustrated books. Ms. Evelyn Peters, an expert in education, wrote a few books in English. We had them translated, and Ms. Nikbakht, a famous Iranian artist at that time, illustrated them for us²⁵³.

The association was also active in different cultural activities, especially thanks to the work of a new branch of the organization, called the '*Dustdārān-e honar*', the Lovers of the Arts. The aim of this new group of women, who was formed in 1953, was also to provide financial support to the association, while collecting money for the activities of the organization. Mahlagha Kashfi Rastegar, who was one of the members of the group since its foundation in 1953, reports:

Among other things, we organized art programs, such as plays, concerts and social speeches. The space was provided to us for free at the Etefāgh School, and the earning from these programs were entirely handed over to the association.²⁵⁴

Besides the practical benefits that the association brought to the quarter and the mothers of Oudlājān, the role of the organization is important to be mentioned also to show how Jewish women of Tehran «were pioneers in social, philanthropic and cultural activities»²⁵⁵. Shahla Zargarian Javdan reports:

It was so encouraging to see my mother and her colleagues so active at a time when the Iranian woman, and especially Jewish, had no opportunity for activities outside home. It aroused our respect, and it planted the seed of love to serve the society in my heart of those of my siblings.²⁵⁶

The gender policy promoted by the two Pahlavi included a legal reform of the family, which limited child marriage and polygamy, and was reinforced by a series of reforms aimed at promoting women's education in different areas, especially in health services, under the supervision of the ministry of health. From the fifties, in order to help the mothers of Oudlājān, also famous Jewish hospital of Oudlājān, *Bimārestān-e Sapir*²⁵⁷ promoted different educational programmes for women on

²⁵¹ Memories of Shahla Zargarian Javdan, as reported in the Ijwo 70 years of Service – A documentary film.

²⁵² Ibidem

²⁵³ Memories of Minou Soomekh Michlin, cit.

²⁵⁴ Memories of Mahlagha Kashfi Rastegar, as reported in the Ijwo 70 years of Service – A documentary film.

²⁵⁵ Ijwo 70 years of Service – A documentary film.

²⁵⁶ Memories of Shahla Zargarian Javdan memories, as reported in the Ijwo 70 years of Service – A documentary film.

²⁵⁷ In 1921 a group of benefactors of the Jewish Community of Tehran, set up a small clinic (called *Kheirkhah*) at the site of the Mullah Henna Synagogue in *Oudlājān*. In 1942 the clinic became a hospital, named Cyrus the Great. Then it was recalled Sapir Hospital, under the name of the first

health issues, such as physicians and maternal education classes, like the classes of the late Dr. Mutlab Pediatrician and Ms. Kohan Environmental Health Specialist.²⁵⁸ This practice of education was a great support for women, who had the possibility also to overcome their isolation. During the fifties, many women found jobs in the health services, especially as nurses in the Sapir hospital. The hospital had a long history on helping the Jewish community of Sarechāl, since the establishment, in 1921, of the first clinic of the quarter, named *Kānun Kheir Khāh* (The Philanthropy Centre Clinic).

Figure3: Building of the old Kānun Kheir Khāh (“The Philanthropy Centre Clinic”). Personal picture, Tehran, November 2019.



The clinic was built at the site of the Mollah Hanina Synagogue, in the eastern side of Oudlājān, where the old and sick caretaker of the synagogue, Yousef Melamed, gave precious support to the idea. Most patients were children, also of non-Jewish heritage, who suffered of health issues related to the poor quality of water in the quarter. In 1942, after the arrival of the Polish refugees in Tehran, Ruhollah Sapir, a famous Jewish physician, stood for the clinic to become a hospital. His idea was born because of the discrimination suffered by many Polish refugees in other Tehrani hospitals. His idea was to create a hospital which would have treat each patient «with the utmost dedication, never discriminating against anyone for any reason, and especially not for her or his religious affiliation»²⁵⁹. Roman, a polish refuge interviewed by Stendferd, remembers her experience in the Sapir Hospital as follow:

physician of the clinic, who died in 1923 for a typhus epidemy that was destroying the quarter. The hospital is still working today.

²⁵⁸ Bimārestān-e Sapir-7dorim.com

²⁵⁹ Lior Sternfeld. Poland Is Not Lost While We Still Live: The Making of Polish Iran, 1941–45. *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no. 3 (2018): 101-127, esp. 108

I later learned that they first sent me to a military hospital, but after being bathed by the nurses they noticed I was a Jew [due to circumcision] and they transferred me to the Jewish hospital. There were many Poles and Jews there.²⁶⁰

The clinic, thanks to donations made by some Jewish families, was able to serve, for many years, all the communities of Oudlājān: the creation of the hospital gathered around the quarter the care of many Jewish doctors who were available to give their support to the needs of the community.

Figure4: Picture of a class of educated programme for women on health issues, year 1343-1964. (Source: 7dorim.com).



²⁶⁰ Roman, interview by Lior Sternfeld, July 15, 2013. Sternfeld, Poland Is Not, 108.

Figure5: Physicians and maternal education classes at the Sapir Hospital. (Source: 7dorim).



Figure6: Many women found job as nurses in the Sapir hospital. In the picture we can see the Graduate Certificate Award Ceremonies at the Benefit Center, year 1343 – 1964. (Source: 7dorim).



In 1952 the Iranian Jewish women organization decided to create the Iranian Jewish Women Maiden's organization. The group was offering educational classes for young girls in different subjects like tailoring and typing. They also offered courses on culinary arts, especially on baking pastries. Vajiheh Melamed Darvish recalls: Our pastry classes were received warmly for the Passover. They sold well, and we had some good earnings for it. Until that time, young girls were often sent to the homes of older women, in order to practice the arts of sewing and homemaking and in order to learn a job.

The work of another important organizations, the *Sāzemān- bānvān-e hātef* (Hatef Ladies Organization) contributed to the improvement of Jewish life in Oudlājān and mainly to improve the role of Jewish women in the quarter. This association, which was founded during the 1950s, was one of the most dynamic and vibrant charity organization of the Jewish community, founded by an educated Jewish woman who hold a Ph.D. from the University of Tehran, Dr. Azizah Baral. Her goal was to help Jewish families in the whole Oudlājān area and to save them from poverty. She worked especially with the women of Oudlājān, which condition required more attention.

The role of women as angels of the home and manager of the house never changed, but their life was integrated into a new social system in which the role of women outside the family sphere was valued.

Chapter 2

The abandonment of Oudlājān: from urban changes to social transformation

2.1 The Jews during Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi: a new political era for the country

In 1941 Reza Shah Pahlavi was forced into exile by the Allied forces, which occupied Iran. From that moment, the history of Iran would interface with the history of the whole world that continued to burn in the flames of the Second world war. Also in Iran, which had remained neutral, the aftermath of the war was heavy. Among the woeful consequences, famine, poverty, hunger, pillage, stampede, and violence raged through the country. Moreover, various contagious diseases, like plague, cholera, sexually transmitted diseases, and typhus, spread everywhere, and especially in the poor quarters of the major big Iranian cities.

The difficult consequences of the war in the country contributed to the formation of a new strong political power that was aimed at the construction of a new State, which had to promote the rehabilitation of the country's image internationally and modernization. It was in that circumstance that social, cultural, and political transformations found the space to flourish in Iran. Indeed, the first years of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reign were characterized by an evident cultural and social openness and by a liberal policy, which was strongly aimed at pluralism.

This policy of strong détente, which led to an initial great consensus for Mohammad Reza, materialized at the level of internal politics in the rehabilitation of several previously banned organizations. This aspect was fundamental for the birth of new associations and political parties that began to reflect the ethnic and religious diversity of Iran's population¹. In particular, in that period the Communist Tudeh Party started to emerge. Moreover, different newspapers that were banned to publish under Reza Shah could operate once again in the country. On a foreign level, Mohammad Reza Shah presented himself as the restorer of an order that saw a strong alignment of Iran with the Western powers.

Mohamed Reza Shah's rise to power coincided with the rise of Tehran's Jews into the political and social sphere of the capital. The abandonment of the old quarter led the community to an ever-greater integration into the Tehrani society from which until then they had remained isolated. The new sociality that the

¹ Lior Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth Century Iran*, (Stanford University Press, 2019), 42

community experienced in those years also meant a new activism: for the first time, we can witness the active participation of many Jews in the cultural and social sphere of the country. Some Jews, albeit still in small number, engaged also in the political sphere of the country. Rahimyian argues that «despite the political ferment that characterized Iran during this period, Jews generally refrained from joining political parties».² The only exception was the Tudeh party, which could offer a space to create an anti-fascist political force and a leftist community. Furthermore, as argued by Sternfeld, who defines the Tudeh Party as a ‘party of minorities’, the ethnic and religious communities of Iran «found a way to become involved in the nation’s political and social life in Communist parties that, at least nominally, adhered to universalist ideologies».³ In particular that party, whose name in Persian ‘*Hezb-e Tūde-ye Īrān*’ means ‘Party of the Masses of Iran’, promoted an important message of equality between all citizens that was necessary in a country made of differences, like the Iranian one. For many young Jews the Tudeh represented a new opportunity to create a young and secular society and also «the opportunity to rebel against tradition, tight family structure, and religion».⁴ Yousef, who took part in the Tudeh when he was in his mid-20s, remembers:

For me the Tudeh represented a way to evade from my own boundaries, which were imposed on me by the society. Moreover, while taking part in the Tudeh, I could feel I was making history, as part of the society that could rebel against despots and imperialism⁵.

The Jews who participated in the Tudeh were mostly young Jewish intellectuals who new Farsi, French and sometimes also English. For that reason, they represented a big resource for the party and in particular they could be useful in the «literary output»⁶ of the Tudeh, which was represented by three journals: *Rahbar*, *Mardum* and *Razm*. Shmuel Anvar, an activist of the Tudeh, published the weekly newspaper *Nissan* that covered various social and political issues of that period. It is symptomatic the position of the journal against imperialism and especially Zionism, which was described as a «puppet of American imperialism»⁷.

The Jews of Tehran were the most involved in this new social and political process, which led many young Jews to begin active citizens. Also many Jews of Oudlājān, especially young boys, participated in different associations, in particular those associations of which aspirations were equality and egalitarianism. These people were moved by a deep knowledge of the situation in which many Iranians were forced to live. Yousef says:

Our goal was that of improving the conditions of many Jews. We lived in a non-egalitarian society, where economic differences also became class differences⁸.

² Houman Sarshar, *Jewish Communities of Iran: Entries on Judeo-Persian Communities*, (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2011), 64.

³ Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 43.

⁴ Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 44.

⁵ Personal interview with Yousef, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

⁶ Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 47.

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ Personal interview with Yousef, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

Among those young Jews of Oudlājān there was Haroun ‘Parviz’ Yashayaei, who started getting involved in social activism when he was in elementary school. At the time, a group of boys who attended the Ezra Yaghoub synagogue under the supervision of the famous Jewish lexicographer Sulaiman Shlomo Haim, had formed a group called in Hebrew *kol na'im* (The Pleasant Voice). The young Yashayaei continued his activism in high school. In 1951, he became a member of the magazine *Bani Ādam* (Children of Adam) under the editorship of Loghman Saleh. The magazine was affiliated with a group of Jews who were deeply involved with the ideas of the Tudeh Party.⁹ Like many of his companions of the group, he later joined the Tudeh party.

2.1.1 Mohammad Mosaddeq's rise to power.

The rise to power of Mohammad Mosaddeq, who was elected Iran's Prime Minister in 1951, signed the emerge of a new political scenario in the country. In particular, his dismissal, as I will examine later, deeply undermined Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reign, which became increasingly authoritarian.

Mosaddeq's intentions, which clashed with the international aspirations of the late Shah, were to nationalize the Iranian oil industry, bringing the country's oil production under the control of the State. Indeed, in the early 1950s the Iranian oil industry was still under the control of the British, who also held the highest percentage of the company's profits. Mosaddeq's attempts, which culminated in a formal request to the Iranian Parliament to enact a law for the nationalization of the oil industry, were widely appreciated by the Iranian public opinion. Indeed, at the time, the oil concession was disliked by the majority of Iranians, who saw in the 'black gold' the symbol of their independence. On the other hand, this hostile position made him disliked by the British. As argued by Bridget Kendall, while Mossadeq's position was hugely popular in Iran, his intention «put him at loggerheads with the British government, which in response instigated a worldwide boycott of Iranian oil».¹⁰ Moreover, Mosaddeq, as a fervent republican, was also in open conflict with Mohammad Reza, whose policy of total openness to the West he did not share. When Mossadeq came to power, he limited the Shah's powers (also forbidding him to keep in touch with foreign heads of state) and, on the contrary, he strengthened the power of parliamentarians. Subsequently, in 1953, he forced the Shah to leave the country, exiling him to Rome.

In August 1953, the government led by Mossadeq was overthrown by a military coup favoured by an operation of the American and British secret services, called 'Operation Ajax'. Mossadeq was replaced by Prime Minister Fazlollah Zahedi, who was liked by the British. The Shah, who had been temporarily exiled to Rome after the rise of Mossadeq, returned to the country.

Homa Sarshar, a young Jewish girl who was living in Tehran at the time, remembers that day as follow:

On that day I was just a shocked seven-year-old girl who didn't know what was going to happen. We lived very close to where Mosaddeq's home was – it was walking distance to his residence. I vividly remember that day:

⁹ Haroun Parviz Yashayaei in <http://www.7dorim.com/tasavir/Yeshayaee.asp> (Accessed on 24/08/2021).

¹⁰ Bridget Kendall, *The Cold War: A New Oral History of Life Between East and West*, (BBC Books, 2017), 149.

everybody was telling us to stay inside the house. We were watching through the window. I saw people running around, and I heard gunshots.¹¹

The *coup d'état* of 1953, which was seen as an evident interference by the West on Iranian affairs, was the first to lay the foundations for a revolutionary discourse, accentuating, as never before, the opposition movement to the monarchy. On the contrary, the figure of Mossadeq, who in this revolutionary spirit was elevated to the rank of martyr, became a symbol of people's struggle against the Shah.

Homa Sarshar reports:

I believe those were the last days and months of having the ecstasy of experiencing freedom and democracy in the country. Slowly, slowly after that, democracy and freedom became a memory only. A lot of people would remember him as a Prime Minister who was running a democratic government. After that, the country did not experience any of those glorious moments that we had with Mossadeq¹²

The discontent towards Mohammad Reza Pahlavi grew from that moment more and more capillary, reaching to embrace all the apparatuses of society. At domestic level, the Shah had promoted the dismissal of a Prime Minister whose policy was aimed at the nationalization of the oil industry, with a view to increasing revenues for the Iranian State. At the international level, following the coup against Prime Minister Mossadegh, the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi became more and more closely tied to the United States of America, becoming the gendarme of the Americans in the Middle East. In 1960 he recognized the State of Israel, thus openly isolating himself from the other Middle Eastern countries. In addition, the Shah seemed an increasingly anachronistic figure. Indeed, in an era of the rise of republicanism, the Shah flaunted monarchism, 'Shahism'¹³ and 'Pahlavism'. In an era of nationalism and anti-imperialism, he came to power as a result of the CIA's ousting of Mohammad Mossadeq, the idol of Iranian nationalism. In an era of strong tensions, the Shah sided with his enemies, appointing himself as the American guardian of the Persian Gulf and openly aligning himself with the United States on sensitive issues such as Palestine and Vietnam.

The pro-western policy of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, which was one of the most important differences with Reza Sha's policy, had contributed to the growth of the civilising mission of European and American organizations in Iran. In the late Shah they «found an ally in their battle for the salvation of the societies from the stronghold of tradition»¹⁴.

Anyway, after Mossadeq, the Shah was able to consolidate his personal power by adopting a more repressive and authoritarian approach. Like his father, he reinforced the military force and the policy's apparatus with the creation, in 1957, of the secret police, the *sāzemān-e ettelā' āt va amniyat keshavr*, better known as

¹¹ Kendall, *The Cold War*, 156.

¹² Kendall, *The Cold War*, 157.

¹³ Quoted from Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, New York State University, (Cambridge University Press 2009), 155. With the term the author intends to identify the power of the hereditary ruler of Iran. The term Shāh identifies a command figure who enjoys absolute powers in the political field but who can also boast a considerable spiritual caliber, also rising above the clergy.

¹⁴ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth - Century Iran*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 8.

SAVAK¹⁵. This latter was supported by CIA and later by the Israeli secret service MOSAD.¹⁶

After the coup against Mossadeq, a period of great tension started. Indeed, many Iranians began fighting against the authoritarian regime of the Shah. In 1960, also the young Haroun Yashayaei took part in a student struggle, which was organized by the Tudeh Party, at the Tehran University. For that reason, he was arrested and imprisoned for nine months. During this period of detention, he and his friends had the chance to meet many other political activists, also Muslims, with whom they would later find themselves in future demonstrations against the Shah, especially on the eve of the 1979 revolution. In 1960, that group of young Jewish activists, who knew the more authoritarian side of the Pahlavi government, formed the *sāzemān-e dāneshgiān-e yaudi*, Jewish Academic Students Organization. Furthermore, from 1960 to June 1963, Haroun Yashayaei joined the Political Students Committee, a leftist organization that was not affiliated with any political party. In an interview with Mohammad Mehdi Moosakhan, Haroun Yashayaei argues:

The Political Students Committee was nearly affiliated with no party. The student movement in those years was really a pervasive one; of course, in those years, political currents came out of the student struggles, but in the early years it was just a student movement. The main characteristic of the student movement was its anti-authoritarianism struggle with the Shah. After formation of the Second National Front, the student movement became inclined to the National Front led by Dr. Mossadegh. The most important political movement in the years 1960 to 1963 was the Second National Front, which later the Freedom Movement derived from it. The Tudeh Party had a small organization and had attracted a number of sympathizers among students, but no organization entirely dominated over the student movement, and the movement was merely a student organization and had its major influence in those years¹⁷.

2.1.2 *The modernization of the country*

The favourable international political scenario and the concentration of power that followed the fall of Mossadeq were two fundamental elements that marked the years of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reign. In fact, the Shah could thus carry on what had also been one of his father's greatest aspirations, namely the modernization of the country. This aspiration is one of the deepest links between Reza Shah's reign and that of his son, who continued in the footsteps of his father in attempting a strong industrialization. Reza Shah had already carried out important infrastructure projects. As argued by Sternfeld «these grandiose projects

¹⁵ The term SAVAK refers to the National Organization for Security and Information, the imperial Iranian secret services that operated between 1957 and 1979. The organization, which was established under the leadership of the CIA in 1957, was trained to control all aspects of Iranian political and social life. Universities, trade unions and even peasant organizations were subject to intense surveillance by the SAVAK agents and their informants. Censorship was established to monitor the country's journalists, literary figures and academics. The organization became known in Iran for her brutal methods during interrogation.

¹⁶ Paidar, *Women and the Political*, 135.

¹⁷ Interview with Haroun Yashayaei by Mohammad Mehdi Moosakhan. Translated by Ruhollah Golmoradi. Interview available online at: <http://www.oral-history.ir/en/show.php?page=post&id=8886> (Accessed on 15 June 2021).

included the trans-Iranian railroad, the development of ports, the expansion of the energy and agriculture sectors, and, of course, the manufacture of machines to serve in developing these venues»¹⁸.

An important event marked the turning point in Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reign: in the year 1963 the Shah inaugurated various reforms that would go down in history as the *Enqelāb-e Sefid*, the 'White Revolution'. His ambitious project, which had the objective of the modernization of the country, was structured in six main points that were related to different aspects of the society: land reform (this was the most controversial and debated among all the reforms because it made all landowners entirely dependent on the state), nationalization of forests, sale of state-owned enterprises to the public, a profit-sharing plan for workers and the creation of a Literacy Army (*Sepāh-e Dānesh*)¹⁹. The enlargement of the right to vote for women, which was recognized in 1963, can also be traced back to this series of reforms. This measure led to the election of six women in the *Majlis*, the Iranian Parliament. Anyway, the reforms were immediately opposed, in particular by landowners and farmers, who would prove to be the main actors of the 1979 revolution. The *Enqelāb-e Sefid* and the harsh mass opposition that followed the reforms, led to the emergence of the key figure of those years of struggle, Ayatollah Khomeini, whose political ambitions found full support in the population.

In this new political and social scenario, the Iranian society was also transforming itself completely, becoming, as I will examine later, more and more urbanized. Tehran, in this sense, became the centre of Mohammad Reza Shah's political aspirations: indeed, Tehran was a modern city, whose defining characteristic was its strong urban culture and, in the vision of the Shah, its cosmopolitanism. The capital, already during Reza Sha's reign, became an international city. In particular, «the creation of European enclaves with clubs and schools within distinctive communities, contributed to Reza Sha's cosmopolitan vision [of Tehran], as well as to his vision of Iran as European outpost»²⁰. During that period, new migrants from all over the Middle East, Allied troops, refugees, and aid workers arrived in Iran and especially in the biggest urban centres. All of this helped the transformation of the country, and in particular of Tehran, into an international capital. According to existing statistics, in 1941 there were almost fourteen million Iranians citizens. The new arrivals added seven percent to Iran's total population.²¹ The strong wave of refugees and migrants coming from all over the world (like the Poles from Europe, and the Iraqi Jews from the Middle East) contributed to the population growth in the country. The Iraqi community, different from the Poles, remained in Iran also in the years to come, creating a specific culture that imprinted a great sign especially in the Iranian capital.

The first Iraqi Jews arrived in Iran between 1914 and 1918 and settled in Abadan, a city close to the Iraqi city of Basra. A second wave of immigration, between 1941 and 1951, led many Iraqi Jews to settle also in Tehran and to open different synagogues and institutions there. As Argued by Sternfeld, «the Jewish community of Iraq was generally affluent, overwhelmingly urban, educated, and

¹⁸ Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 15.

¹⁹ They were young volunteers who, as an alternative to military service, went to rural villages to open schools.

²⁰ Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 16.

²¹ Lior Sternfeld. 'Poland Is Not Lost While We Still Live': The Making of Polish Iran, 1941–45. *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no. 3 (2018): 101-127, esp. 104.

very much integrated. Its members excelled in commerce and in the financial sectors, and at its peak, it constituted a third of Baghdad's population»²². He also argues that «relations between Jewish communities in Iraq and Iran had enjoyed a long history, revolving around Talmudic centres of religious training (for example, Iranian rabbis were trained in the seminaries in Baghdad), as well as commercial ties»²³. Nevertheless, they remained a separate community from the one of the Iranian Jews, both deeply proud of their origins. In this respect, «Iraqi Jews in Iran developed a hybrid identity in an attempt to preserve their Arab culture and language while making use of the skills, education, and vocations they brought from Iraq, especially in the commercial real»²⁴.

The arrival of these communities, which changed - even though temporary - the demographic situation of the country, also impacted the situation of the Iranian Jews especially in big cities. Indeed, as argued by Sternfeld «the Jewish community, while never considered a monolithic, homogenous community, grew more diverse than ever before»²⁵. All of this contributed to developing the cosmopolitan environments that had characterized the city by the late 1940s and to a strong demographic change in Iran and especially in Tehran, which influenced also social aspects.

Following the numerous reforms of the Shah and following the great modernization that the country experienced in those years, many Jews enjoyed great economic benefits from this situation. For example, new job opportunities opened up for the Jews, who had the chance to abandon their more traditional jobs. To this contributed the fact that the Jewish community was mostly an urban community. Indeed, in big cities there were more opportunities for the professional growth of the people. According to the Statistical Center of Iran, in 1976 the Iranian Jewish community was about 62.000, with 42.000 people living in Tehran.²⁶

In addition, the fact of being a largely educated community, with a deep knowledge of an international language such as French, led the Jews to be dominant figures in some professional sectors, especially in the capital. Haddad argues that in 1968, the Iranian Jewish community was the wealthiest Jewish community in all Africa and Asia.²⁷ For all these reasons, while operating a limited reconstruction of reality, some authors²⁸ started defining Mohammad Reza Shah's reign as the 'golden age' for Iranian Jews.

It was precisely at that time that a rift within the Jewish community began to emerge. Actually, there was a strong division between those Jews who, especially driven by the numerous economic benefits, supported the Shah unconditionally and those who, because of their egalitarian ideas, were strong opponents of the Shah and his repressive policy.

2.2 The Pahlavi dynasty and the question of the Iranian identity

In general, the Iranian history after the Constitutional Movement, which paved the way for the construction of a nation state related to a sense of belonging to the

²² Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 33.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 36.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 18.

²⁶ Sarshar, *Jewish Communities*, 69.

²⁷ Heskell Haddad, *Jews of Arab and Islamic countries: history, problems, solutions*, (New York: Shengold Publishers, 1984), 50.

²⁸ See for example: Levy, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran*

nation (citizenship), reveals a constant increase in the participation of Jews in the political, economic and cultural life of Iran.²⁹ In this regard, the social vicissitudes that have affected the country over the period have shaped the process of national integration of the Jews in Iran and have influenced the formation of national unity. Moreover, the turmoil and disorder of the century provided the Jews with a deeper sense of their historical connection to the land in which they reside. The effect of these new sets of values on the population, and especially on Iranian Jewish communities, was seen with the rise in power of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–1941). In that period, Iranian national identity emerged and was favoured due to the promotion of a unified society, including the sentiment of *Iranianness* (belonging to the Iranian nation). Actually, as Argued by Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, since the time of the late Qajar «Iran not only had emerged from the mist of traditional histories as an independent and continuous entity, but attention also started to be paid to its cultural, religious, and social characteristics as a primordial nation»³⁰. Together with the construction of a centralized role for the state, the policies of Reza Shah firmly supported the promotion of a strong collective identity, which has existed, as stated in the previous chapter, since before the rise of nationalistic movements in the country. In this regard, also Mohammad Reza Shah wrote that nationalism was felt by the Persians since the time of Cyrus the Great.³¹

However, Reza Shah promoted the importance for the newly founded state of a strong Iranian national identity, which was fundamental to the creation of a historical and national consciousness. This idea, tying the notion of Iran to a specific territory, a «specific sense of self and a knowledge of former greatness»³², provided the basis for a strong Iranian nationalism which was created by perceiving and treating the nation as a community.³³ In reality, Reza Shah was promoting uniformity in a country that has been always characterized by its multicultural face, trying to crystallize and condense Iranian identity into a collective cultural dimension according to a romantic notion of the sense of ‘belonging to Iran’. The construction of a defined cultural dimension had to be achieved also through a totalitarian control under the linguistic dimension: it meant that the Shah had to promote the use of a unifying language, such as Persian. For this reason, the Shah founded the Persian Language Academy (*farhangestān-e zabān-e fārsi*), which had the aim of purge the Persian language from any foreign linguistic influences, especially French.³⁴

Land and borders, in this sense, became the key criteria of the Iranian nationality: as stated by Saleh and Worrall «individuals of different groups for the first time found themselves within a centralized sovereign state which was rapidly eroding their traditional autonomy and loose notions of fealty and alliance»³⁵. As argued by Rasmus Elling, the Pahlavi «have sought to infuse *mellat* with the

²⁹ Sarshar, *Jewish Communities*, 68.

³⁰ Reza Zia-Ebrahim, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation*, (Columbia University Press, 2018).

³¹ Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, *Missione per il mio Paese*, (Milano: Rizzoli, 1961), 143.

³² Saleh Alam and James Worrall, Between Darius and Khomeini: Exploring Iran's National Identity Problematique, in *National Identities* 17, no. 1 (2015), 73-97, esp. 74.

³³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 1991), 40.

³⁴ Pejman Abdolmohammadi and Giampiero Cama, *Contemporary Domestic and Foreign Policies of Iran* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 22.

³⁵ Alam and Worrall, Between Darius and Khomeini, 79-80.

western-inspired modern sense of ‘sovereign nation’ and nation state»³⁶.

This concept of Iranian identity, defined through boundaries, myths, and historical memories, was buttressed by a policy of the assimilation of diversity rather than a recognition of it. The attempts of the Iranian government, with Reza Shah first and then with his son, was actually to make minorities invisible. In order to achieve this goal, the two Pahlavi put any effort to integrate minorities in the society. Nevertheless, this integration meant eroding minorities’ peculiarities, while camouflaging them into a defined Iranian context. This was not, anymore, a recognition of difference, but a will to destroy that and a desire to incorporate them in a new social framework. In the urban space, this could be achieved by including minorities in the renovation of the city. In this regard, the Shah promoted the abandoning of their past traditions, which, for the Jewish community of Tehran, were rooted in the old quarter of Oudlājān.

In this context, the demarcation of Iranian boundaries, land, and borders, in a country composed of differences, became the only criterion of Iranian nationality. Reza Shah’s «conservative notion»³⁷ of Iranian national identity glorified several millennia of Persian history, from the rise of the Achaemenid Empire, and was based on mythical imagery of past Iranian monarchies. The historical memories of the past were mostly consecrated in the literary culture. The first Pahlavi promoted the formation of a secular concept of identity. In this regard, Abdolmohammadi argues «with Reza Shah, the concept of nation and citizenship became a secular element of society, replacing the perception of belonging to the Islamic community»³⁸. Reza Shah’s new national project based on the construction of an identity which privileged the Iranian heritage over the religious one also led to a new approach towards the various Iranian minorities, which had been part of the country for centuries: in particular, he removed all the discriminatory laws against Jews. The Iranian Jews were fully integrated into the national project and into the idea of a unified Iranian identity: for the first time, also from a legal perspective, they could perceive themselves as equal citizens of Iran. Actually, as argued by Sarshar, this approach toward the Jews was not motivated by a genuinely positive attitude towards religious minorities in the country but was a necessary step in the service of Reza Shah’s national project.³⁹ Regardless of its intention, without any doubt, the Reza Shah regime played an important role in enforcing the rights of the Iranian Jews.

On the eve of the Second World War, the rise to power of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979) spurred a greater effort towards the edification of an Iranian identity based on the ideology of a great ancient Iranian past, emphasizing, more than before, Iranian pre-Islamic heritage. The Pahlavi «coercive approach to the construction of national identity»⁴⁰, limited the notion of Iranian identity to a specific historical period of the country. Similarly to that of his father, Mohammad Reza Shah’s approach to nationalism, which he defined as «positive»⁴¹, was built upon the idea of exclusion of the link between Iran and other Muslim and Arab countries, creating a deep opposition between Iranians and Islam. In this regard,

³⁶ Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and ethnicity after Khomeini*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 121.

³⁷ Ahmad Ashraf, The crisis of national and ethnic identities in contemporary Iran, in *Iranian studies*, Vol. 26 n. 1/2 (Winter/Spring 1993), 159-164, esp. 161.

³⁸ Abdolmohammadi and Cama, *Contemporary Domestic*, 21.

³⁹ Sarshar, *Jewish Communities*.

⁴⁰ Alam and Worrall, *Between Darius and Khomeini*, 83.

⁴¹ Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, *Missione per il mio Paese*, 143.

Mohammed Reza Shah wrote that there was no doubt that Persian culture had much more similarities with the Western culture than the Chinese one and that of their Arab neighbours. For the late Shah, Iran was one of the first headquarters of the Aryans to which the Americans and Europeans attribute their racially descent.⁴² According to him, the Arab conquest had not affected the purity of Iranian culture: indeed, although with the Arab conquest of Iran also the language has received significant contributions from Arabic words, the social and idiomatic identity of Iranians has remained intact.⁴³

The Pahlavi purification of the Iranian culture, language, history and identity from the Islamic substratum required the promotion of a forced cultural assimilation of the minority groups. This cultural homogeneity would have brought the Iranian nation closer to the 'great civilization'. In this regard, as we already argued, this policy was accompanied by the exclusion of differences and the assimilation of the minority groups, without a recognition of their specificities and characteristics.

The secular Iranian nationalism discourse and the glorification of Iran's pre-Islamic past also provided the Jews a sense of their historical connection and affinity to the land in which they resided. This happened for different reasons. First of all, it is linked to the figure of Cyrus the Great, the founder of the ancient Persian Empire and the source of the Iranian identity for the Pahlavi. He was considered as the saviour of the Jewish people of Iran, as the redeemer of the Jews and the Messiah of God. The second aspect is related to the ancient pre-Islamic history of Iran. The Jews could feel as integral part of the Pahlavi national discourse because they believed in Judaism as being one of the oldest religions practiced in Iran. In the Pahlavi ideology, religion was important just in a traditional term and it was related to the Zoroastrian cultural roots.

According to the Pahlavi concept of national identity, which was relied on territorial integrity, national sovereignty and shared memories, the promotion of national and territorial unity developed a homologized society, constructed on the basis of belonging to the Iranian soil. The two Pahlavi monarchs were able to legitimize their roles and power by combining the traditional institutions of the monarchy with a more modern approach to nationalism, one that can be defined as 'secular', empathizing the formation of a «modern civil society, citizenship, and a democratic policy»⁴⁴. The religious element, which has been an important part of Iranian culture for centuries, was abandoned or, in some cases, even framed as an element of separation and division between people.

It has to be emphasized that the Shah's secularization policy, which was «attempting to westernize and demoralize the country from its Islamic values»⁴⁵, seems to have alienated the Jewish community (especially the youngest educated generation) from their traditions and culture as well, and dramatically altered their identity which was now constructed from a new perspective. The Jews, increasingly identifying themselves only with Iran, showed less interest in anything related to Jewish life and the religious sphere as a whole. The concepts of territorial unity and belonging to the Iranian soil appear in opposition to religious sentiment, which was to be, on the contrary, the major element of convergence between the Jewish community and the other religious communities of Iran after the 1979 turning point. The Islamic Revolution, proposing a combination of a sense of belonging to Iran

⁴² Ivi, p. 13.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Ashraf, *The crisis of national*, p. 61.

⁴⁵ Delshad, *Case of Religiosity*, p. 65 – 79, esp. 67.

and religion, has reconstructed a new identity based both on Persian roots and religious values.

2. 3 The Shah and the women

The modernizing policy of the late Shah also had a very profound social impact, especially regarding women. All the changes occurred in the gender sphere, with an improving of women's position in the country, have been mostly attributed to Mohammad Reza Shah. Indeed, in that period, we can examine a general improvement of women's condition in Iran thanks also to the reforms of the White Revolution, like the extension of the right to vote in 1963 and the promulgation of the Family Protection Law in 1967. On 3 March 1963 women obtained the right to vote. Moreover, in the next elections of the Majles in September 1963, for the first time, six women were elected. All these achievements led to the process of modernization, which was the latest and most important inspiration of the Shah. His idea of a modern State and society was closely linked to the process of assimilation of the Western culture, especially the American one. The Shah, in his book, stated that Occidentalisation, which was one of the most important ideological movements of that period, was a challenge that Iranian gladly accepted.⁴⁶ For these important achievements regarding the women's sphere in Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah reign has always been interpreted, also by scholars, as the 'golden age'. This because the analysis of women's role in Middle Eastern societies had always been affected by a limited orientalist theory, which used the dichotomies of tradition and modernity to explain the social changes of women. Moreover, this narrative has been influenced by an attempt of «essentialization and rectification of women's history»⁴⁷ which has affected, in particular, the narratives about women in the Iranian context during the last Shah regime.

In reality, the policy of the late Shah was contradictory in many senses and moreover, it was applied uniformly and heterogeneously, not taking into consideration the cultural and social diversities of the Iranian woman's context, which required a different and more articulated approach. This policy was functioned, once again, to the Shah's ideology of a Great Civilization, which we can admire as his first inspiration, especially after the second phase of his reign. Furthermore, as stated by Paidar, Mohammad Reza Shah gender policy was «firmly based on a patriarchal model of the family, where the father assumed the total control and initiative over the rights and responsibilities of the women on the family»⁴⁸. The gender dimension was expressed by a commingling of idealized images of woman and the families. At the centre there was his own family, which represented the model for all the families in Iran. The Shah was painted «as the ideal man, powerful, masculine, single minded, moralistic, protective and the undisputed head of his family and nation»⁴⁹. In his vision, the woman had to be, as required by a biological-natural system, first wife and mother. In this context, the Shah's wife represented the perfect model: «she was beautiful, feminine, and elegant; as a wife she was loyal, subservient, and caring; as a mother she was

⁴⁶ Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, *Missione per il mio Paese*, 143.

⁴⁷ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth - Century Iran*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 142.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 148.

devoted and conscientious»⁵⁰. The image of the women he promoted had to be «beautiful, educated, and secular» but still «maternal, selfless, and feminine»⁵¹.

Another important aspect is that the gender policy of the Shah was inspired by an ideology which found its way of existence in the dichotomy ‘tradition vs modernization’: in his idea, modernization, was analysed as a positive instrument and perceived as «the motor of change»⁵² in Iran; moreover, it has been analysed as related to progress and emancipation. On the contrary, the tradition was seen as a negative tool associated with masculinity, patriarchy, submission, and oppression. The reality is that modernity must be necessarily associated also to secularization, industrialization, and urbanization, which had also shown side effects in the country, with regard to the gender sphere.

The advent of Mohammad Reza Shah had also inaugurated the construction of a new relationship between the State and the women in Iran. The emancipation of women had to be promoted by a paternal State, which had to work on the liberation of women by the oppression of traditions, and, most of all, by religion. This policy of secularization was accentuated by all the changes occurred in the country and also emphasized by the urban changes in Iran. This attempt to westernized, modernized, and secularized women’s identity also changed the relationship between women and the public space, which had to be secular. In this regard, women had to be liberated also by all religious symbols, something that had already started in 1930’s. This policy strongly affected woman’s life, and in particular Jewish women who need to adapt to a new cultural forms and ideas, where religion, the core of their life in Oudlājān, did not have the same importance. In particular, in that period, we assist to a deeper privatization of religion, even though it was already a private affair for women in Oudlājān. One of the most important aspects is that all of these new social values, together with a strong nationalistic policy, had also affected Jewish women’s identity, which was strongly based on religion. In this sense, women’s emancipation in this new modern Iranian society has been examined in terms of their acquisition of these new social values and in the abandoning of their traditional ones.

The role of Jewish women in Tehran from the 1950’s had experienced a substantial improvement that affected all aspects of woman society and impacted uniformly the old and the new generation with various nuances and effects. Women’s emancipation, which is examined as the most important process ongoing of that period, was the result of different factors that worked together. It was, first of all, the result of a policy of modernization of the country that was initiated with Mohammad Reza Shah. Furthermore, it was the consequence of other important socio-cultural factors. For example, as I will examine later in this chapter, also the urban reorganization of Tehran, with the emigration from the old Jewish quarter, entailed a reorganization of women’s life, of their role and position in the society. In this new Tehrani society, the older generation of women of Oudlājān struggled, more than the new one, to find their position. Anyway, in this new society, they found their way of resistance perpetrating their traditional role: their contribution would be vital for the family and also Jewish subsistence. While the new generation strongly contributed to the economic and social progress of the country, as part of the labour market, especially in specific sectors. In that period, the percentage of

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 144.

⁵¹ Saba Soomekh, *From the Shahs to Los Angeles: Three Generations of Iranian Jewish Women between Religion and Culture*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 170.

⁵² Paidar, *Women and the Political Process*, 6.

educated women increased: the rate of literacy in 1976 reached the 35.7 percent. We can see this enlargement also within the Jewish community. In Tehran the employment rate for women was, like in many other urban areas, around 11,3 percent.⁵³ However, women were still confined on feminine professions. For all that reasons, we can affirm that Mohammad Reza Shah tried to improve the position of women, but his gender policy was not able to bridge the gap of power between men and women. Iran remained a society fully based on a patriarchal system. Moreover, as argued by Soomekh, this policy failed in «integrating women into the process of national development and bring about gender equality»⁵⁴.

2.4 The making of a new Tehran: the manifestation of modernity

The city of Tehran started its growing with the Qajar dynasty, when the administrative centralisation was accompanied by a physical expansion of the city with the enlargement of the old walls. As stated by Amirhamadi, the city experienced «a rapid and multifaceted socio-spatial growth and increasing separation among its social classes»⁵⁵. The author identified three major phases of the transformation of the capital. This his was followed by the transformation of the Tehrani society also from a socio-cultural point of view. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Tehran was a pre-capitalistic city that was still based on agriculture; from the 1920 to 1950 the town was transformed in a transitional capitalist city and, after the 1950s, it became a dependent capitalist town. The two latter steps, which were also marked by the phenomenon of urbanization, were influenced by a strong internationally oriented policy. Indeed, the process of urbanization of Tehran was the result of two related process: a solid interaction with the West and the integration of Iran in the global economy.⁵⁶

The transformation of Tehran into a modern and urbanized city and the inevitable and incontrovertible decline of the old neighbourhoods had started already under Reza Shah but it reached its peak in the mid-1950s. Actually, Reza Shah was not the first to recognise the potential for Tehran to play a major role in any future State-policy. Indeed, already Shah Tahmasp (of the Safavid) decided to build strong walls in 1554 to transform Tehran in a great capital. However, at that time, Esfahan was still the most important Iranian city and it remained for a long period the centre of the power. Reza Shah, who inaugurated a policy of modernisation in Iran, was concerned that the priorities of his reign were the rebuilding of the political and administrative centre of his power, namely, the Iranian capital. The city expansion had to be constructed towards a capitalist development (albeit still not completed, since capitalism was not dominant in all aspects of the Iranian society) and consecrated by an authoritarian political system. Reza Shah «deployed Tehran as the site of power from which he could centralize

⁵³ Soomekh, *From the Shahs to Los Angeles*, 52.

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 51.

⁵⁵ Hooshang Amirahmadi and Ali Kiafar, *The Transformation of Tehran from a Garrison Town to a Primate City: A Tale of rapid Growth and Uneven Development in Urban Development in the Muslim World*, ed. Hooshang Amirahmadi, Salah S. El-Shakhs (New York, Routledge, 2017), 109-136, esp. 110.

⁵⁶ Morteza Mirgholami & Sidh Sintusingha, *From Traditional Mahalleh to Modern Neighbourhood: the case of Narmak, Tehran*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia Africa and the Middle East* 32, no. (April 2012), 214-237, esp. 214.

the State and homogenize the nation»⁵⁷. Moreover, the Shah inaugurated a policy of centralization of power, which meant not only making Tehran the political centre of the State (as the Qajar had already done in the past) but also the main centre of the industrial, commercial, and financial sectors. Undeniably, the economic development promoted by Reza Shah and exacerbated by his son, was concentrated mostly in Tehran. This phenomenon caused a labour-force migration to the capital: the new migrants, who arrived mostly from rural areas of the country, were mostly employed in the oil industry and in the infrastructure sector. This phenomenon was especially due to the high concentration of industries around the capital. From that period, Tehran started becoming a centre of convergence of people arriving from various provinces of Tehran: this process of urbanisation brought a wide group of people to the capital, a practice that favoured the social and cultural interactions within its inhabitants. Since 1920 the city experienced a population explosion (with around 250.000 / 300.000 people)⁵⁸, which was followed by a necessary physical expansion. Indeed, the mass migration of people and the consequent growing in population required a complete urban renewal of Tehran. This process of transformation of the Iranian capital represents the best manifestation of Reza Shah's policy, which was devoted to modernizing the country in an effort of starting a «new era»⁵⁹ that was influenced by a European style.

This urban renewal of Tehran was made by «restructuring the old city according to planning principles that were applied uniformly»⁶⁰ in all Iran. The impact of this policy was extremely strong because the changes drastically altered the historical characteristics of the city, especially its architecture and its cultural and social values. First of all, the Shah proceeded with the destruction of the old historical patterns of the city: for example, in 1937 he ordered the turn down of the city walls, an event that was strongly linked with his idea of the construction of a new and modern city. This shows an important aspect that marked the policy of the two Pahlavi. Indeed, their reigns were characterized, also on a social and cultural point of view, by a constant struggle between two forces: the old and the new, the tradition and the modernisation. In this regard, the demolition of the walls, as argued by Grigor, «enabled both the physical expansion of the urban fabric and the eradication of the last evidence of the old regime»⁶¹. To this deconstruction, which was seen by many as «vandalism»⁶², also followed the gradual destruction of the old Tehrani quarters, which had to be replaced by new modern avenues and squares.

The majority of Tehran was then covered by these new avenues, which divided a big part of the old part of the city. One of the most significant changes of that period was the formation of new shopping centres that were eroding the importance and the centrality of the old shopping district of Tehran, causing the gradual fade of the bazaar. Moreover, the new city, which was designed by «European architecture style and urban designed concepts»⁶³, was developing on

⁵⁷ Talinn Grigor, *Tehran: A Revolution in Making*, in *The Political Landscapes of Capitals*, ed. Jessica Christie and Jelena Bogdanovic, (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2015), 347-376, esp. 354.

⁵⁸ Amirahmadi and Kiafar, *The Transformation of Tehran*, 115.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 117.

⁶⁰ Ehlers Eckart., & Floor Willem, *Urban Change in Iran, 1920-1941*, *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 3/4 (1993), 251-275, esp. 254.

⁶¹ Grigor, *Tehran: A Revolution*, 354.

⁶² Personal interview with Yousef and Shamsi, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

⁶³ Amirahmadi and Kiafar, *The Transformation of Tehran*, 117.

the north part of the historical core, leading to a marginalisation of the old quarters. This caused two related phenomena: a deterioration and a physical decline of the traditional urban section of Tehran and a consequence increased gap between the north and the south of the capital. According to this, also Oudlājān started becoming, more than before, an isolated and marginalized section of the city. This latter would be emphasized after the 1950's when, as we will analyse later, the former inhabitants of Oudlājān would start leaving the old sector of the city in order to move the most attractive quarters on the north. The final result of this condition was a slow but strong decline of the quarter, a phenomenon that would also endure a spatial segregation.⁶⁴

The advent of Mohammad Reza Shah inaugurated a new era that influenced all aspects of the Iranian society and impacted, with strong effects, also the urban morphology of Tehran and the sociality of the capital. All of this was the consequence of the policy of the monarch, which was based on the idea of modernisation. This latter had to be achieved by a capitalist expansion of the economy and the integration of Iran in the international market, but also through a series of social reforms. As already explained, the 1963 Revolution was the turning point of Mohammad Reza Shah's policy. In order to proceed with the unification of the Iranian territory, Reza Shah had already promoted the development of the transport system in the country. In Tehran, with the aim to create an open city for the movement of people and goods, a new transport system and new roads were constructed. Mohammad Reza Shah, for its part, continued the work of his father through the strengthening of the existing infrastructures, and the development of a more modern motorway and railway network. Actually, also for the late Shah, urbanism had to be the engine of the modernisation of the country and Tehran, in this sense, had to be the model for the construction of his utopian dream⁶⁵. This had to be made through «a combination of autocratic modernism and orientalist historicism»⁶⁶, employing the models that were also used in the construction of national identity: westernization, modernisation, uniformity. Tehran had to become the symbol of the Iranian grandeur and the image of a modern society: for that reason, in the capital was introduced a new lifestyle, a phenomenon that, in the urban morphology, corresponded to the construction of new boulevards (in a perfect Haussman style), cinema, parks and shopping malls. The construction of new majestic, modern, and European areas, together with an exacerbated urbanisation, was also made in order to show the majesty of the Pahlavi Empire. Two examples can help us to understand this idea: the first one is the construction of the *Borj-e Shahiād-e Ariāmeh*r, the Shah's Memorial Tower (now *Borj-e Āzādi*, 'Freedom Tower'), a majestic tower which served as «a symbolic modern gate that had to evoke both continuity with the past and progress into the future»⁶⁷. This corresponded to the Sha's vision about his country and the Iranian society in general. In this regard, Mohammad Reza Shah wrote in his book that Iran, under his reign, was becoming stronger and richer day by day; moreover, Iranian people were building together a new nation and at the same time trying to preserve the

⁶⁴ For a comprehensive approach to the history of Iranian Jews in the twentieth century, I recommend reading Lior B. Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth Century Iran*, (Stanford University Press, 2019).

⁶⁵ Asma Mehan Tabula Rasa planning: creative destruction and building a new urban identity in Tehran, *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 41, no. 3, (2017): 210-220, esp. 210.

⁶⁶ Mehan Tabula Rasa, 210.

⁶⁷ Grigor, Tehran: A Revolution, 362.

more positive aspects of the nationalistic sentiment.⁶⁸

The *Borj-e Shahiād-e Ariāmeh*r, which was constructed between 1971 and 1978, was the manifesto of the modernisation of the country and the symbol of the Shah's power. The second example is given by the *Shahestan-e Pahlavi* project, a multiuse complex of tertiary activities that had to be for the Shah the equivalent of Persepolis for the Achaemenid kings.⁶⁹ The complex, which was planned to be the concentration of luxury hotels, offices, and shops, was never constructed and the works for its realization were interrupted by the 1979 Revolution. Anyway, all of these new constructions showed a new face of Tehran that was constructed in a new «hollywoodesque»⁷⁰ style. Furthermore, all of these urban changes were made by destroying the old quarters of the capital. Indeed, as stated by Mehan «the master plan of the city was intended to project a paradoxical contrast to the labyrinth lanes of old quarters»⁷¹.

Another aspect that intensified the eroding of the old core of the capital was that the city expanded to North-West, with the construction of new modern quarters in this area of Tehran. These new neighbourhoods were mostly populated by the upper and middle classes, while in the south lived poor people and the migrants. Actually, the urban expansion of Tehran showed a constant tendency, since the past, to move northward. In the past this need was due to the necessity to move away from the desert, looking mostly for fresh air. The emigration to the north part of the city became more popular under Mohammad Reza Shah. In 1959, the urban expansion of Tehran to the north was consecrated, also symbolically, by the construction of a new royal palace in the north core of the city, where was moved all the political power of the country. Also the Shah, in 1959, moved to the north of Tehran, in the Niavaran complex: that year, the private residence of the monarch from the Marble Palace became the Niavaran palace in the Shemiran quarter. The gap between a rich north and a poor south was the clearest sign of the contradictory expansion of Tehran and also of Mohammad Reza Shah's policy. This fact determined the future social relations of the city. In fact, if the political, administrative, and monarchical power moved northward, the religious power remained in the south. This specific aspect can be associated also to another phenomenon that characterized the Shah's policy: the secularization of the society and of the urban space. Indeed, the north part of the city, which was constructed in a new European style, was mostly secular with less presence of religious buildings.

The urban change of Tehran was followed by a social transformation of the capital: indeed, the city had to be the reflex of a modern, secularized, internationally oriented and young society. The changing of Tehran sociologically also paved the way for the emergence of a new civil power formed by the bourgeoisie, the intellectuals (the majority of them were leftist) and the students who openly opposed the Shah's policy. In particular, they were against the Shah's attempts to forcefully modernize the country in favour of the middle class. This phenomenon was getting bigger the gap between the rich and the poor, increasing the social exclusion of some people and encouraging inequality within the Tehrani society. This would imprint, in the next years, a significant change in the history of Iran, especially when Tehran became the centre of the discontent against the late Shah. Grigor argued that, as every capital city, also Tehran has served as the primary space

⁶⁸ Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, *Missione per il mio Paese*, 143.

⁶⁹ Amirahmadi and Kiafar, *The Transformation of Tehran*, 124.

⁷⁰ Rosita Forbes, *Conflict: Angora to Afghanistan*, (London: Cassel & Co., 1931), 105.

⁷¹ Mehan *Tabula Rasa*, 216.

for political contestation, which was functioned to the formation of a strong opposition to the Shah. She argues: «Tehran's urban space is, and has always been, 'the' condition for political contestation»⁷² as it was, from the beginning of its history, «a revolution in making»⁷³.

2.5 The abandonment of Oudlājān

The abandonment of the old Jewish quarter of Tehran by the Jews was a slow but a gradual phenomenon that began around the 1930s under Reza Shah Pahlavi. Nevertheless, it was during the 1950s, under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, that the number of Jewish families who were leaving Oudlājān reached its pick. The Jewish emigration into their new life in greater Tehran coincided with the beginning of the Shah's new policy that was aimed at the modernization of the country. At the same time, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi tried to promote his cosmopolitan vision of the city of Tehran, which was based on European models, imposing new social and cultural styles inside the capital.

The reasons for the abandonment of the Oudlājān by the Jews have been manifold, but all of them were a natural consequence of the evolution of the historical events in the country. Yousef, who recalls that period with deep emotion, says:

When Tehran started growing also the Jews started moving. I don't think that the Jews left the neighbourhood for a specific reason. It was a natural consequence of the historical situation that Tehran was living under the late Shah. We could actually move because since the time of Shah Reza the jobs of our fathers have been everywhere, also outside our Jewish quarter. Outside of Oudlājān the Jews could look also for new jobs and opportunities. I think that we left Oudlājān for the same reasons that the rest of the quarter's inhabitants - also Muslims - left the neighbourhood. At the time, I remember it very well, Oudlājān was a *mahalleh-ie khāki* (dusty neighbourhood), so they probably wanted a better life.⁷⁴

Therefore, the gradual fade of Oudlājān, with the almost complete abandonment of the neighbourhood by its Jewish inhabitants, was due to the constructions of new and more attractive neighbourhoods, particularly in the northern part of Tehran. The Jews emigrated in the new quarters that were constructed between the Golestan Palace and the Reza Shah Avenue (now *Enqelab Avenue*), in the districts of Ferdowsi, Lalezar and Manuchehri. Most of them emigrated in the Amir-Abad district, close to the newly constructed Amirabad synagogue. Tehran was completely reorganized with the construction of these new areas, which represented, differently from the past, the various social classes of the capital, especially the newly-growing-founded middle class, of which the Jews were part. These areas, which were all constructed with the same modern European style, presented more homogeneity, and were not linked to any religious or ethnic community.

Many of the people I met in Tehran stressed out the fact that the Jewish community of Oudlājān could have done more to safeguard the neighbourhood from destruction and abandonment. Everyone, at that time, accepted without

⁷² Grigor, Tehran: A Revolution, 347.

⁷³ Ivi, p. 348.

⁷⁴ Personal interview with Yousef, Tehran, November 2019.

hesitation that the neighbourhood was stripped of its strong identity and value. For many, leaving the quarter meant starting a new existence and therefore a new beginning required such a drastic approach. Yousef is convinced that the Jews should have fought to improve the condition of Oudlājān without destroying its peculiarities. However, at the time, the idea of reevaluating space was not common. In front of a cup of hot tea, which we were taken in the back of a big store on the corner of a side street of Oudlājān, we discussed the fact that, perhaps, with the mentality of preservation, which is very common today, Oudlājān could have been saved.

Shamsi, recalling that period of transition to the north, says:

I always wondered why we didn't fight to save Oudlājān. Of course, sociologically speaking, we wanted a larger and modern space for living. But we got completely overwhelmed by this idea. From that moment, the entire life of the Jews became a fashion apartment (*opārtemān-e mad*) in the north. We started sharing our lives with everyone, and in the majority of the cases not with other Jewish families. We actually started to share our life with strangers in a city that we did not recognize, but that we had to do everything to feel our⁷⁵.

The most attractive quarters for the Jews were the «integrated neighbourhoods»⁷⁶ in Tehran's northern suburbs, which were realized in a perfect western style. These quarters, which represented the manifestation of magnificence and wealth, can be seen as the «light of the Shah's ambitious to rebrand Tehran as a developed and modern city in the eyes of the foreigners»⁷⁷.

Eitan remembers:

Many Jewish families moved to the east part of the capital. Clearly at the time the area was entirely deserted, but little by little it became enormously populated. Now it is a completely built area. We can say the same about the area around Tajrish: in the 1950s, Tajrish was for us the place where to go to get some fresh air during the summer, since it was an area outside the city. It was the place to go on vacation and to stay a month or two; but in a short time Tajrish became a wealthy area, a residential one, where to build beautiful and expensive houses.⁷⁸

With the construction of new quarters in the north, Oudlājān lost its appeal. Moreover, the quarter lost its residential function, since the biggest area covered by the neighbourhood was then converted in an economic area, where the bazaar started to dominate the image of the quarter. As a result, the original inhabitants gradually left their houses and shops, which started being used by new inhabitants, most of whom from a low socioeconomic class. For all that reasons, Oudlājān became an «underprivileged and socioeconomically problematic section of Tehran»⁷⁹. Sari, recalling the moment in which they were leaving Oudlājān, emotionally says:

⁷⁵ Personal interview with Shamsi, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

⁷⁶ Sarshar, *Jewish Communities*, 69.

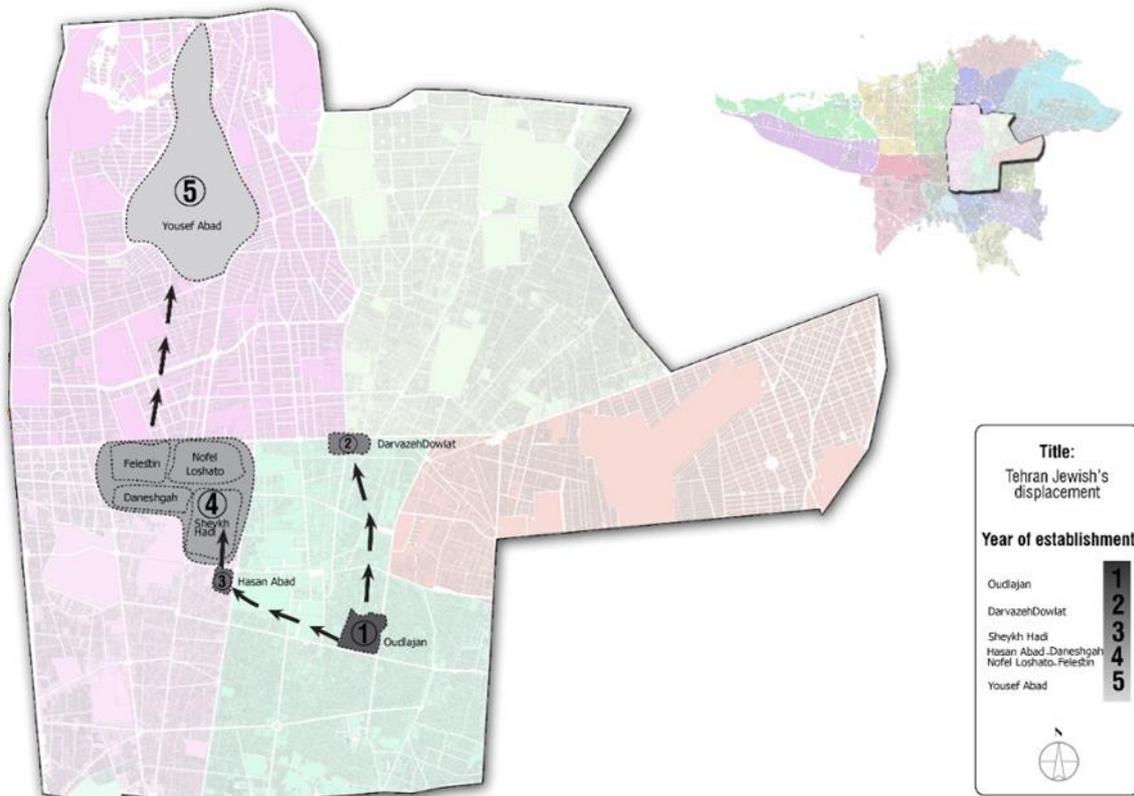
⁷⁷ Mirgholami & Sintusingha, *From Traditional Mahalleh*, 9.

⁷⁸ Personal interview with Eitan, Rome, September 2019. My translation from Persian.

⁷⁹ Eckart and Willem, *Urban Change in Iran*, 271.

What we left behind us was a neighbourhood in ruins. So, we were somehow forced to leave that area of the city, which was not able to welcome our fast-growing community, in terms of number and also in terms of economic, cultural, and social aspirations.

Figure7: Relocation of the Jews' settlement in Tehran (Source: Narciss M. Sohrabi 2021)⁸⁰.



2.5.1 A new beginning: being part of a nationally oriented city.

The Jews saw the abandonment of Oudlājān as an opportunity to become, for the first time, social actors in the history of the country. Greater Tehran offered them an ideal space in which they could live their aspirations: the city, which was modern, young, and deeply urbanized, represented their will of rebirth. On the contrary, Oudlājān was the symbol of everything they needed to get rid of at the time: traditions, poverty, and isolation. In particular, they wanted to get rid of the burden of being a community of Jews and feel integrated into a new sociality. These, together with the need to leave a ruined neighbourhood, were the motivations that drove many families to move.

At the beginning, as argued by Dorit, the sense of belonging to a religious community, which was one of the signs of people's life in Oudlājān, seemed to be less strong than in the past. Changes in the rigid structure of the State and the new urban development also facilitated the social changes and social mobility, which passed through a redefinition also of a sense of self as Iranian Jews. Since then, the

⁸⁰ Narciss M. Sohrabi, "Tehran synagogues: the socio-cultural topographies and architectural typologies", *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, (2021): 1-14.

quarter has represented for the Jews of Tehran the only source of their identity and the base of their belongingness.

The Jews had to take advantage of the nation-building project of the Shah, which was west-oriented, secular and also national-oriented with emphasis on Persian language and heritage. In this regard, Hakakian, while talking about his uncle, writes:

The place where he belonged was Iran. Everything about him was Iranian, even his name: Ardi, short for Ardeshir, the king of an ancient Persian Empire. He was so settled that he was even willing to invest in vanity, to buy depreciating goods like a BMW. No other car would have matched his optimism, the exuberant claim he laid to Tehran. Tehran and no other city⁸¹.

The transformation of the life of the Tehrani Jews in that period was accompanied by different other signs, which are able to mark the changing of the status of the Jews in the capital: they were not more secluded in a quarter, but they were part of the society in any aspect. One of the elements that signed this passage is the constant use of the Persian language instead of other dialects, particularly since the second part of the twentieth century. As Sarshar argues, while the young men of the second generation in Oudlājān already used to speak standard Persian, the use of a common language was intensified, without any gender or generation restriction, during this century.⁸² The use of *fārsi* also invested the liturgical sphere: since that period, as Mizrahi argues, some traditional blessings were recited in Persian and little by little even the language of the sermons became less Jewish, with the adoption of Persian.⁸³

This linguistic feature remarks the imposition, by the government, of a standard, Persian-based identity, which had influenced the life of the Jews of Oudlājān in different senses. One of the main aspects is that the majority of the young students of that period, and especially boys, started attending public schools and universities. The educational system, which was completely re-organized and also Persianized, gave the Jews the opportunity, as argued by Sternfeld, «to climb up the social ladder»⁸⁴. The reorganization of the educational system, which started already with Reza Shah, had imposed not the closing of the religious school, but the imposition of a standard-based type of education in which religious could not find its way of existence. Following the policy of Reza Sha, in the years to follow, all the schools started what Sari, during our interview, defined as a «secularization process of the education system»⁸⁵. In this regard, even the majority of Jewish schools started showing little concern on Jewish religious subjects. One of the most famous schools, which was attended by young Jewish boys in the north of Tehran, was the Ettefāqh school. This was built by Mayer Abdallah Basson, a wealthy Baghdadi Jew, in 1948. Ettefāqh was, differently from other old Jewish schools in Tehran, a liberal and secularized institution.

⁸¹ Roja Hakakian *Journey from the Land of No: A girlhood caught in revolutionary Iran*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), 51.

⁸² Sarshar, *Jewish Communities*, 196.

⁸³ Hanina Mizrahi, Jewish Persian Traditions, in *A Collection of Tradition*, ed., A. Wassertil, (Jerusalem, 1980): 273-288.

⁸⁴ Lior Sternfeld *The Jewish Community in Iran from 1941 until the Revolution*, Fred and Ellen Lewis/JDC Archives Fellowship (Lecture), available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pRC6g4jTxY>. (Accessed on 30 August 2021).

⁸⁵ Personal interview with Sari, Tehran, November 2019.

The policy of the two Pahlavi emphasized the constant identification with the past Iranian history, marking a clear division between the pre-Islamic period and the post Arabic invasion. Indeed, the Pahlavi notion of national identity was the so called '*Iranyat*'⁸⁶, relied on the key principles of «Persian language, Zoroastrian cultural heritage and the imperial history of Persia»⁸⁷. This feature, I have noticed, is still really strong on the Iranian Jews living out of Iran now days, who still have a strong sense of attachment with the Shah era and the images of glorification of that period. Eitan for, example, states:

The Iranian Jewish roots are very ancient, so it is clear that, over the centuries, the Jews have completely absorbed the Iranian mentality: in the way of dressing, eating, speaking. They have become part of society already with the Achaemenids. When the Islamic invasion of Iran took place, they began to be considered *najis*⁸⁸ - impure. To me it is clear: the real Iran, the true Iranian culture is that which goes from Cyrus until the 1400s of the Safavid age, with Abbas Shah. But it is clear that the decline of the Iranian culture already started with the Islamic invasion of Iran: the Arabs, from that moment, tried to completely influence the Iranian society, also from a linguistic point of view, by importing seven new letters and a new alphabet. Before the Arab invasion, we only knew the language of Ferdowsi, the greatest Iranian poet. Ferdowsi was a language purist, while the Arab influence is clearly seen in Hafez. For example, I have difficulty reading Hafez, while with Ferdowsi I have less problems.⁸⁹

2.5.2 Tehran and new economic opportunities

The Jewish community of Oudlājān, as argued in the first chapter, was not a monolithic society and was very diverse within it even at an economic level. Indeed, as in any community at that time there were rich families and poor families. However, what held the community together in Oudlājān was the lack of economic opportunities that made social mobility very difficult. Once again, the abandonment of the neighbourhood gave the community access to a new economic reality, which also favoured major social changes. Since the fifties of the twentieth century there has been a general improvement of the situation of the community and in particular it is in that period that the economic status of Tehran's Jewish community improved strongly. This latter can be seen in the fact that, when the Jews left Oudlājān, they started being part of the new middle class. The most significant transformation was the abandonment of their traditional jobs, which were more concentrated in the jewellery sectors. In this regard, Judith Goldstein argues that the Jews «from a traditional role as itinerant peddlers and sellers of second-hand goods started owning or managing antiques store»⁹⁰.

⁸⁶ Shabnam J. Holliday, *Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2011), 38. With this term the author means to define the 'Iran's pre-Islamic heritage'.

⁸⁷ Saleh Alam, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 58.

⁸⁸ See: Vera Basch, Moreen, Review of The Jews of Iran in the Nineteenth Century: Aspects of History, Community, and Culture, by D. Yeroushalmi, *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 4, (2011), 587–590.

⁸⁹ Personal interview with Eitan, Rome, September 2019.

⁹⁰ Judith L. Goldstein, The Things They Left Behind, in *The Jews of Iran: The History, Religion, and Culture of a Community in the Islamic World*, ed. Houman Sarshar (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), 173-190, esp. 182.

It can be argued that when the Jews began settling outside Oudlājān, they also started embracing new branches of the Iranian economy and flourishing in new markets.⁹¹ In the past, for example, the Jews were really famous for their work in the textile sectors (*pārche frushi*)⁹², but after the expansion of Tehran, when they left the quarter, they experienced new job opportunities. Yousef, for example, argues that the language skills that the Jews acquired thanks to the schools allowed them to open their business to new international markets, especially import/export business.

In the past, Shamsi, remembers:

Jews have always done the same jobs. For example, many worked the gold and then sold it, while many Jews were sellers of antiques and rugs. Having become specialists in this type of work is certainly due to the history of Iranian Jews: in the past other jobs, such as doctors and engineers, were not allowed to them.⁹³

From the 1950s they started to be especially involved in international trade, becoming influential dominant figures in banking, insurance, shipping, industry and imports.⁹⁴ As argued by Sarshar, by 1968 the Iranian Jewish community, especially the Jews concentrated in developed urban areas, such as Tehran, became the wealthiest Jewish community in Asia and Africa and the richest Jewish community in the world.⁹⁵ Roja Hakakian in her book *Journey from the land of no: a girlhood caught in revolutionary Iran*, referring to her uncle Ardi, says: «He had shed the ghetto jobs: he wasn't a butcher or a salesman, a teacher or gold trader, but an insurance man».⁹⁶

When the Jews left the quarter they started also a new close relationship with their Muslim fellows, which were already active part of the urban culture of Teheran, part of its economic growth and active participant of the economic power of the capital, which was leading Tehran to becoming one of the biggest and modern cities in the Middle East. The relationship they intertwined with the other Muslim inhabitants of Oudlājān, albeit relatively small, was neutral, created on a common sense of belonging to the historical core of the capital; this means that it was based on a mutual understanding of their common roots as Iranian citizens. The 1950's marked a new way in the relationship between the two communities, when the Jews became part of what it was until now a society entirely dominated by Muslim: for the first time also the Jews could feel to be part of that society. This period was brilliantly defined by the scholar Soomekh as «Jews' widespread integration into

⁹¹ This process had already started with Reza Shah in the 1930's. His regime played an important role in the enforcing the rights of the Iranian Jews. Recognized as equal citizens, the Jews could serve in the national army and could be enrolled in state school. Moreover, for the first time they could held government jobs and get government licenses to open shops in the bazars and outside the Jewish quarters. This prompted many Jews to open their shops in new commercial areas of the biggest cities of Iran, especially Tehran. This emigration would be one of the greatest phenomena of the next decennia and reached its peak under Mohammad Reza.

⁹² Personal interview with Asal, Tehran, November 2019.

⁹³ Personal interview with Shamsi, Tehran, November 2019.

⁹⁴ Sarshar, *Jewish Communities*, 68.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁶ Hakakian *Journey from the Land of No*, 51.

Muslim society»⁹⁷, a society that for the first time welcomed the Jews as active members, and most of all, as an economic force which could give a great contribution to the growth of Iran.

Moreover, thanks to the economic integration of the Jews into the Tehrani society, the Jews could feel to be integral part of this new urban culture. From that moment, more decisively, they took part in the political and social life of Tehran, and they were completely absorbed by this new reality. For that reason, when the community abandoned the neighborhood, it initially tried to forget the past, because the appropriation of a new urban reality, as the one in greater Tehran, left no room for what the Jews had been in the past. «We could not fall into the abyss of nostalgia, because we had to live this new opportunity»⁹⁸, Sari reports. Indeed, the abandonment of the neighborhood meant dreaming, hoping for a new beginning that for many Jews was represented by a new and vital economic growth, for others by the opportunity for cultural advancement and for many meant getting out of a situation of poverty.

Anyway, as it will be discussed later in this chapter, the upgrading economic status of the Jews marked, once again, a gradual abandonment of Jewish values. Indeed, the integration in the local economy, as it happened already for the integration in the society, changed the sense of belonging of the Jews to a religious community who was becoming more and more secularized. Indeed, the religion could be an obstacle in the construction of a new life in what that was already a modernized and secularized city, Tehran. Asal, in this regard, reports:

The Jews, who had relative freedom under Mohammad Reza, became billionaires and this, inevitably, put them in contact with other members of the society and with other economic opportunities. All of this caused a change of their religious life.⁹⁹

Using the intensive and strong word of Habib Levy, it can be argued that the Jewish community of Tehran «was intoxicated with its relative freedom»¹⁰⁰.

2.6 The abandonment of Oudlājān as a gradual phenomenon

Spatial changes, especially when involved in the process of labour migration, have influenced socio-cultural changes.¹⁰¹ In this context, it can be argued that all the important spatial changes that happened in Oudlājān and consequently in greater Tehran from the 1950s, have showed their effects in different aspects: this especially concerning Jewish life, but in particular regarding women and the family sphere as a whole.

⁹⁷ Saba Soomekh, *Iranian Jewish Women: Domesticating Religion and Appropriating Zoroastrian Religion in Ritual Life*, *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 18, (2009): 13-38, esp. 16.

⁹⁸ Personal interview with Sari, Tehran, November 2019.

⁹⁹ Personal interview with Asal, Tehran, November 2019..

¹⁰⁰ Habib Levy, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran: The Outset of the Diaspora*. Abridged and edited from the Persian by Hooshang Ebrami, translated by George W. Maschke, (Los Angeles, 1999), 493.

¹⁰¹ Janet Bauer, Demographic change, women and the family in a migrant neighbourhood of Tehran, in *Women and the Family in Iran*, ed. Asghar Fathi, (Brill: 1985), 158-194.

This spatial and social reorganization of the community of Oudlājān was gradual: this not only because the process started in the late 1930s and took around twenty years to be completed, but also because it involved the members of the old community in different ways.

2.6.1 The bus Line number 8

Some Jewish men, already before the complete abandonment of the Oudlājān quarter, had started working and opening their shops in the north of Tehran. Having obtained by Reza Shah the license for open their business also out of Oudlājān, they could move their shops to the northern part of the Tehran, to the wealthiest and the most modern areas of the capital. In this regard, before the complete abandonment of the quarter, they started gradually their moving to greater Tehran. This period of uncertainty and mass mobilization was well remembered by all the respondents, who talked about a «chaotic coming and going of people and goods»¹⁰² in and out of the Oudlājān quarter.

This mobilization was also possible thanks to the development of a new public transport system. As reported by the Research & Studies Center of Iranian Jews (7dorim) «the increasing urban traffic» of that period and «the rising need for the out-of-town passenger transportation brought the large new buses into the picture»¹⁰³. In his book ‘Mission for my Country’, also Mohammed Reza Pahlavi highlighted the fact that in 1958 large buses, often even double-decker buses, had begun to appear on the streets of Tehran. The capital was expanding so rapidly that on that occasion the Shah wrote, for the first time, about the need to build an underground railway.¹⁰⁴

Since the demand of buses was higher than the effective power of the public sector, the government had to devolve the provision of transport service on several main routes to the private sector. This service started in 1939 and it developed a lot in the years to follow: at the time there were 9 such lines, with no more than 10 buses assigned to a line. In 1956, the bus lines were 24, with 40 buses assigned to each line. The bus Line number 8, whose route ran along Oudlājān linking the north and the south of the capital, was one of this passenger’s private lines that were functioning as a public bus. The first owner of this bus was Ebrahim Setareh-Shenas a young Jewish boy who, in the need of taking care of his family after the death of his father, decided to engage in this new business. In 1946 he bought a used 1938 American Chevrolet Bus for 8,000 tomans¹⁰⁵ and painted in navy-blue the top of the bus, while for the lower part and the arches used the white colour. Ebrahim Setareh-Shenas then hired a driver man and an assistant, who had different tasks, like the maintenance of the bus.¹⁰⁶ The assistant had also to sell the tickets at the entrance of the bus: the price was 1 rial per passenger for a trip across Tehran. Another important task of the *assistant* was the announcement of each stop, along all the long route of the bus. Indeed, line number 8 ran in part along the old Cyrus Street, which is known today as Mostafa-Khomeini Street, passing across the Oudlājān neighbourhood. The first stop was at the Masjid Shah Station, just out of

¹⁰² Personal interview with Dorit, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

¹⁰³ 7dorim.com –The bus Line no.8. Accessed on 30 August 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, *Missione per il mio Paese*, 157.

¹⁰⁵ Toman is a super unit of the official currency of Iran, the rial.

¹⁰⁶ “The bus Line no.8”, 7.dorim.com. Available at: <https://www.7dorim.com/en/miscellaneous/the-bus-line-no-8/> (Accessed on 30 August 2021).

the Grand Bazaar of Tehran, while the following bus-stops, as known at the time, were: the Cyrus Three-Way, the Daroukhaneh, Tekkyeh, Kalantari, Sar-Cheshmeh, Majlis or Parliament, Shah-Abad, Mokhberoddoleh, Saadi, Darvazeh Doulat, Shah-Reza, Villa, and the Pahlavi Intersection. The last stop in the north of the capital was the Mojassameh Statue Square, known today as the ‘Revolution Square’.

The men of Oudlājān, who had improved their economic position opening shops in the north, used this bus a lot, almost every day, except on Saturdays. Shamsi and Sari well remember weaving their fathers in the early morning when they were leaving the neighbourhood. They also had beautiful images of them welcoming their fathers again in the evening, after a long day of work. They used to come back home in the late evening, right at the time for the evening prayers and the dinner. The bus number 8, which usually set out to work at 6 in the morning, and anchored at night, about 9 or 10 in the evening, was perfect for the needs of these new businessmen.

The business of the private buses ended up in 1959, when the government established the Unified Bus Company, directed by Lieutenant-Colonel Karim-Khan Zand. In the same year, all the bus owners with a city license were required to turn their buses over to the government for 10,000 toman each. However, by 1959, Jewish displacement needs from Oudlājān to the north of Tehran had become increasingly scarce as most Jewish families had by that time moved permanently to new neighbourhoods in the north. The certainty of a new economic stability and the prospects that modern Tehran offered them, had pushed men to leave the neighbourhood permanently and bring with them their family, wife, and children.

During this internal migration from the south to the north of Tehran, the elders were usually the last, within the family, to leave Oudlājān. This was due to different reasons. Many families, for example, struggled to find an accommodation that was suitable for the elders. Many people told me that often it has been the grandparents who refused to move to the north, especially for sentimental reasons. Indeed, it was hard for them to leave their houses and the quarter in which their families had lived in for generations. For this reason, they stayed strongly anchored to their houses and habits, adapting to a new way of living the quarter, without the constant presence of the extended family, in particular their nephews. One of the stories which I was told is related to Eitan's grandfather, who remained in Oudlājān for few years before joining his family in the north of Tehran. When he left the neighborhood, because of the insistence of his sons and daughters, he kept all his habits and never gave up his old job. Eitan, in this regard, remembers:

My grandfather had a vegetable shop in Oudlājān, where he sold vegetables and fruits. For this reason, he was called *Yousef-e baghāl*. When we gather between cousins, we still talk a lot about him. I still remember when he came out of the quarter, he was so sad that he decided to open another grocery shop in the north of Tehran, even though he was already an old man. This new shop was on my way to school: so, every morning I used to stop by him to take some fruits. But he was always angry, because probably he did not have sold anything yet.¹⁰⁷

For the elders, and this aspect is particularly prominent for the elder women of Oudlājān adapting to a new life in greater Tehran was harder: they needed to find themselves in a new area of the city, modern and young. Indeed, the

¹⁰⁷ Personal interview with Eitan, Rome, September 2019. My translation from Persian.

capital, which was promoting modernization, uniformity and also secularization, was eroding their habits and their routine. Moreover, their hesitation in moving out of Oudlājān was also the consequence of the perpetration of image of fear that the life outside the quarters had generated for generations. Indeed, before leaving the neighbourhood, many women, especially older women, had never seen greater Tehran. The people I interviewed shared many familiar stories about it. For example, many women had often heard about Tehran only from the stories of the men who were going to work there with the bus number 8, but never had the chance to move there. Others knew Tehran because the family went to live in the north for a few years. And some others had been to the capital just to visit their families. When my interviewees told me the stories of their grandmothers, I examined that grandchildren's assessment about their grandmothers' feelings was the uncertainty about that new unknown reality in greater Tehran. This idea of the «outside as the unknown»¹⁰⁸ was actually strongly eradicated in all the families. For example, Goldin gives a good description of this fear, while talking about her Jewish quarter in the city of Shiraz. She recited:

The world outside our immediate neighbourhood frightened me. My parents, family members and children my own age told me repeatedly that evil lurked outside the gates of the *mahalleh*¹⁰⁹.

2. 7 The struggle of the adaptation to a new life

The progressive abandonment of the Oudlājān quarter by its inhabitants would result in the destruction and fall of the neighbourhood itself, which will be followed by a slow decline. This was the natural result of a new urbanism, which started already in the 1930s, in which Tehran was developing northward, leading to a marginalization and decline of the old quarters. This decline was also followed by profound changes in the social sphere. Indeed, this new urban policy was made disregarding the value of the old Jewish quarter and its long history as an aggregator for the community¹¹⁰, imposing a new physical and social structure in the city. In the past, the *mahalleh*, intended in their historical definition, were not only places for living. Indeed, they have been considered as communities functioning as urban management, socio-cultural and economic institutions as well as the skeletal parts of any given city.¹¹¹ Moreover, the similarities between the dwellers of each quarter

¹⁰⁸ Personal interview with Dorit, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

¹⁰⁹ Farideh Goldin, *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman*, (London: Brandeis University Press, 2003), p. 93-94.

¹¹⁰ Susan Habib, Navid Jamali, Shaghayegh Shahhossein, Please Save Oudlajan as a Museum Without Walls, ed. Riva Raffaella, *Ecomuseums and cultural landscapes. State of the art and future prospects*, (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli Editore, 2017), 106-115, esp. 109.

¹¹¹ Pirouz Hanachee & Naimeh Rezaei, Living in a Historical Neighborhood: Challenges, Opportunities and Threats, Case Study: Oudlajan Neighborhood in Tehran, *Armanshahr Architecture & Urban Development* 7, no. 14, (Summer, 2015): 63-72, esp. 64.

lead to the formation of a sense of attachment among the residents to a particular group of people¹¹², something that had happened also in Oudlājān.

The collapse of the neighbourhood, as referred by Asal, was a tangible sign of the changes in the lives of the former Oudlājān dwellers. In particular, this affected the social relations within the former inhabitants of the quarter. She refers:

When we left Oudlājān the reasons to meet the other Jews were limited during the Jewish festivities in the synagogues. However, it was not like in the past, when the synagogue was just close to our homes, and we could gather together all the time. We were used to see each other every day, also if we were not relatives, because we used to meet in the same shops and streets. Then everything changed. At the beginning we really lost each other, but then we could find us again.¹¹³

For the Jews, who had lived in Oudlājān for generations, the abandonment of the quarter represented, as already argued, the possibility to overcome a long history of isolation. In particular, it was a way of appropriating of a new Iran, modern and young, of which northern Tehran represented its symbol. Although, at the same time, the abandoning of Oudlājān and the migration to the north had a strong impact on the social life of the Tehrani Jews and in particular on women of the older generation. In this regard, as we will analyse later in this chapter, the transformation of Oudlājān forced a spatial reorganization of women's life, a «remapping»¹¹⁴ of their identities and practices, something that influenced women's life in all aspects. This reorganization of their life after the abandoning of the quarter caused inevitably on women a sense of dislocation: for them, who had lived inside Oudlājān for generations, this could mean the transformation of their identity, namely what they have been for centuries. Actually, as argued by McDowell, any sort of «migration changes individual and group identities, their affiliations, cultural attitudes and practices»¹¹⁵. This new Tehran, «open and influx»¹¹⁶, I have examined that had produced on Jewish women a feeling of fear. Indeed, as reported by many interviews, it seemed that those women had faced a sort of spatial disruption, which was caused above all by the transformation of Oudlājān, the consequent abandonment of the quarter and the assimilation into a new social area of the city. This was due to different reasons which relate to their strong sense of attachment with the quarter and for the fact that they shared a familiar and intimate relationship with it. With the abandonment of Oudlājān, older women felt somehow to be uprooted from their own roots. This determined the fact that these women could not fully identified with that new space in the north of Tehran, although the socio-economic conditions were clearly improved, along with the evolution of the political situation, which was somehow based on the respect of minorities. It can be argued that those women did not live that space¹¹⁷, namely, they did not belong to

¹¹² Vahid Qasemi, and Somaye Negini, Examining the impact of the structure of neighborhood on social identity emphasizing on the neighborhood identity in Isfahan city, *Journal of Regional Studies and Research* 2, no. 7 (2010): 113-136.

¹¹³ Personal interview with Dorit, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

¹¹⁴ Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 210.

¹¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹¹⁶ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 71.

¹¹⁷ Renzo Giorgetti, Spazio vissuto e identità, *Arianna editrice*, Settembre 23 2008. Available online at: https://www.ariannaeditrice.it/articolo.php?id_articolo=21275

Tehran in a complete way. This is unlike what had been their life in Oudlājān, where they were an integral part of the social system of the quarter.

2.7.1 *A new architectural reality*

The Jews in greater Tehran had to adapt to a new architectural reality that imposed different changes in the life of the former Oudlājān dwellers. These radical changes have affected both the private and the public sphere and have also increased the differentiation by age and sex in the use of the space. On a personal level, one of the most drastic transformations was related to the private properties. Indeed, in Oudlājān people were used to live in big houses with a courtyard, where a multigenerational family lived together. In greater Tehran most of the families, which were composed only by parents and children, moved to one apartment that was located in a new and modern tall building. This change imposed also a new familiar way of life, which was more autonomous and also loneliness. For women, whom life was entirely spent for the house and the extended family, this situation was even more complex, because they had to completely reorganize their lives. Speaking in general terms, the moving to the north of the capital increased the gap of power between men and women, marking, more than before, women's life imprisoned in a space control of their movements, which was limited to the house-sphere. The outside remained for a lot of years the unexplored for a lot of the elder women of Oudlājān. For example, Shamsi grandmother never left her apartment and never saw Tehran, if not in the immediate proximity of her house. This was a common feature for many women, which was related to an ancient tradition that was perpetrated since their life in Oudlājān, namely a life completed devoted to the care of the family and the house. However, while in Oudlājān the quarter functioned as a *continuum* of the private house and the outside of the quarter was perceived as safe as the home, in Tehran their life was limited inside their apartments. Indeed, while men were working outside and had more chances to know the new Tehran, old women spent most of their time alone.

In this regard, it can be argued that in Tehran the distinction between the space of women and the space of men became even more marked than in Oudlājān. This is due to different reasons: it depended on the particular morphological characteristics of the city, on the strong urban culture that has affected the capital since the fifties, and also on the radical changes that affected the male working environment. In fact, many Jewish men in those years began to work in large factories, often as directors, and many others began to have important roles as civil servants, like in the court of Mohammad Reza Sha. This new kind of jobs gave Jewish men the possibility of equalizing the Muslims in important positions of prestige and assured them an important economic stability and an influential role in the society. On the other hand, these new opportunities have driven Jewish men away from their familiar sphere. In particular, the court of Mohammad Reza Sha, where many Jewish men were hired, looked like a closed space, physically and socially. As argued by De Groot this new phenomenon «involved gender distinctions between workspaces used by men involved in commercial and

diplomatic transactions and household and neighbourhood spaces in which women as well as men operated»¹¹⁸.

The new morphological situation of the city of Tehran imposed a new way of life of women, whose life was completely reorganized according to the new situation. First of all, women lived a more independent life, especially far from the extended family and the other women, who were dispersed in other quarters of the capital. This aspect contributed to the loss of contact between members of the ancient Oudlājān community who begin to perceive themselves less as a religious community.

Moreover, the increasing interaction with other communities, which was the core of the social relationship of this period, caused an inevitable change of the previous sense of belonging and of all cultural forms that had marked the sense of attachment in the past. Since then we can analyse a persistent identification of place (the quarter) with 'community', a fundamental aspect of the Jewish religious culture. This aspect is specifically important for women. Indeed, when the women of Oudlājān left the quarter, the occasion to meet and gather with other women was limited during special events and occasions, which were related to the most important Jewish festivals: in the past the community used to live concentrated in a specific area, while in the north of Tehran they were dispersed in different new quarters. Nevertheless, as argued by my respondents, there was always a good occasion to meet: for example, weddings were still the best events to experience the same memories of the gathering of the past, especially during the parts of the wedding ceremony dedicated only to girls (like the *henā-bandān*, the henna party, which was held in the bride's house). The marriage celebrations were still a great occasion of unity for the family and the community, but compared to the past, these ceremonies did not have the same importance: for examples the days-long celebration was shortened.

2.7.2 A new urban culture: the secularization of the public space

Life in greater Tehran was difficult also because the Jews out of Oudlājān had to fight against a society that was increasingly eroding its religious values. In the past in Oudlājān, the sharing of the same religious values and principles was one of the most important aspects which determined the strong sentiment of cohesion between all the dwellers.

Related to this aspect, it can be argued that the transformation of Oudlājān, from a residential to a commercial quarter, contributed to generate a sort of 'loss of religiosity' of the Iranian Jews, which was instigated by an increase identification with a national utopia where there was not space for religion. This rhetoric was linked to the Persian heritage and to the idea of a modern society, where religion was just a private affair. This loss was caused by different factors, above all by the physical and architectural transformation of the old quarter, the new urban features of Tehran and the assimilation in new rich neighbourhoods. Indeed, the new quarters in the north were full of modern buildings such as stores and banks but were lacking in hosting important and traditional social amenities like synagogues and *hammām*. In general, in the urban plan of the capital, less importance was given

¹¹⁸ Joanna De Groot, The Space of Gender and the Gender of Space: some Thoughts from a Historian of Nineteenth Century Iran, paper presented at *VIII Congresso della Società Italiana delle Storie* 2021, June 9, 2021.

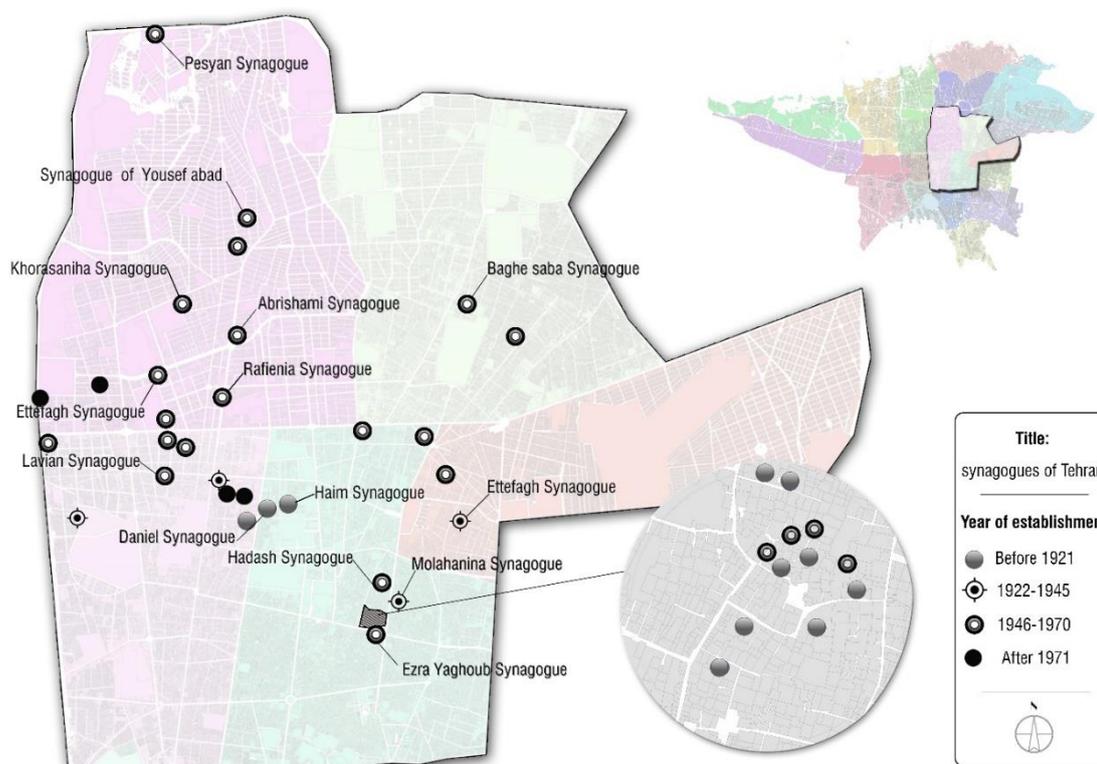
to religious buildings. Anyway, the Jews who moved from Oudlājān to greater Tehran were still a big religious community, which was able to fund the construction of new synagogues of their own. From the 1950's new synagogues were erected and spread through the city, which was expanding northward. One of the first synagogues that was constructed outside the Oudlājān quarter was the *Kanise-ye Yusef Ābād*, which was established in the early 1950s in the Yousef Abad district. A few years later, with the complete abandonment of Oudlājān and the growth of the Jewish population in the capital, the *Kanise-ye Yusef Ābād* was expanded and a new facade was completed in October 1965. In 1951 the *Bagh-e Saba* Synagogue was established. In the early 1960's the Iranian Jewish philanthropist, Agha-Jan (Raphael Haim) Abrishami purchased a land to build the *Kanise-ye Abrishami*, in the upper-middle-class neighbourhood of Kakh-e Shomali (now *Ghiobun-e phelestin*). The synagogue has 500-seats and a mixed school for elementary boys and girls. After that, two Jewish ritual baths, the *Rosa mikveh* for the ladies, and another for the gentlemen, were built for the community. The last synagogue established in Tehran is the *kanisa-e hakim*, which was constructed in 1965 in an area of 2650 square meters in Zafaranieh. The synagogue, which had a separate prayer room for men and women, had a capacity of up to 400 people.¹¹⁹ The presence of these constructions in greater Tehran was functional to the needs of the community, in particular for the good education system provided by these synagogues. Indeed, almost every new construction had a school that was located next to the main religious building. Moreover, these synagogues functioned as an aggregator for the former Oudlājān community and in many cases were the only possibility for the gatherings of the members. One of the most significant differences from the past is that these religious buildings were spread in different neighbourhoods of Tehran, while in the past synagogues and *hammam* were located in one specific quarter, Oudlājān, and available to all the inhabitants. Furthermore, as specified by my interviewees, but particularly by Shamsi and Yousef, these new synagogues did not have, for the community, the same sacredness as the synagogues of Oudlājān. This because, differently from the past, they were not historic buildings. Moreover, these synagogues were built in a modern style to suit Tehran's new streets, and the stories and memories of the community were not preserved in them. Shamsi argues:

There was no longer a true sense of belonging to one or another synagogue in greater Tehran. My family, for example, choose one specific synagogue only for our own convenience, because it was closer to our home. When we were living in Oudlājān we had our favourite synagogue that was the one of my ancestors¹²⁰.

¹¹⁹ This synagogue is still active in Tehran today.

¹²⁰ Personal interview with Shamsi, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

Figure8: Scatterplot of Tehran synagogues based on formation periods (source: Narciss M. Sohrabi 2021)



As argued by Habib Levy, the loss of senior clerical figures, who had guided the community until that time in Oudlājān, especially the death of Mullah Abraham Agha Baba (the last exilarch), was «another blow to the foundations of religion»¹²¹. During my interviews with Eitan and Shehrazād, they both also emphasized another factor, which is related to the use of the veil in public. In 1935 Reza Shah Pahlavi, as part of his modernization policy, issued a decree regarding the abolition of the veil. In a public speech, following the decree, he stated that «women should consider this a great day and use the opportunity available to them to work for the progress of the country».¹²²

In 1935 the Shah also promoted the creation of a Ladies Centre (*khanun-e barovan*), giving the presidency to his daughter Shams Pahlavi. One of the main goals of the association was the promotion of the *kashf-e hejāb* (women’s unveiling). To follow this aim, the organization promoted different meetings and lectures, also discussion the veil as a social harm of exclusion and submission. The creation of the Centre, which was under the control of the State, shows again that the gender’s policy inaugurated by Reza Shah, that would be implemented later by his son, was an instrument in the hands of the government to promote the progress of the State. As argued by Plisking, the abolition of the veil was part of the government’s effort «to coalesce Iranian sentiment around secularism, modernity, and nationalism, rather

¹²¹ Levy, *Comprehensive History*, 493.

¹²² Quoted from Paidar, *Women and the Political*, 106-107.

than religion»¹²³ One of the most problematic aspects of this policy was that the *kashf-e hejāb* was made for the progress of the nation but not taking into consideration the different cultural situations of Iran. In this sense the policy of unveiling was made, once again, desegregating the social values of the society and its diversity.

The scarf was indeed for many women more a cultural ornament than a religious one and it was used by many old Jewish women in Iran. Shahrazād, in this regard, argues:

When Reza Shah prevented the use of the veil and the chador, all hell broke loose: this new imposition was not easy for anyone. In Iran all women, also our mothers and grandmothers, used it. I remember that the *Chador-Charki* (the round chador) was used daily. When they had to go out, they used to wear the *Chador Chaqchur*¹²⁴. This was useful to cover the legs and shoes. When my mother and I went to Oudlājān every weekend we were also used to wear a black chador and we covered ourselves like ravens – she laughs heartily¹²⁵.

The abolition of the use of the veil in public was a problem for many old Jewish women, especially when they abandoned Oudlājān, the place where they felt protected and where there was less control on their movements. Out of Oudlājān, in an open and influx society, they were forced to follow these new social standards, which were imposing a new lifestyle also concerning the clothing.

It is symptomatic the fact that the veil would be later used as an object of protest against Mohammad Reza Shah, also by many young Iranian Jewish women. Indeed, in the late 1970's, as specified by Karen Pliskin, «many educated non-religious Muslim women protesters, wore the Chador in public as a political symbol, to express their hostility toward the anti-religious and despotic late Shah»¹²⁶. This protest, which had a lot of resonance in Iranian and international public opinion of the time, demonstrates the great social and cultural power acquired in those years by the Jewish women of Tehran, who had once been children in Oudlājān. The new generation of Jewish women, as we will discuss in the following paragraphs, would stand out for being a fundamental active part of the new Tehrani society.

The secularization of the public space, which had as a main consequence the loss of the unity of the community, has impacted older women in particular. Indeed, they were denied of one of the most important aspects of their lives in Oudlājān, namely religion. For them, religion meant emancipation and also power, since it gave them a fundamental social role within the community. The loss of this role has led many women to feel a spatial disruption: they felt not to be part of this new Tehrani urban culture which was eroding their values and principles.

The spatial disruption was also intensified by several other elements: the inevitable interactions with other communities, the universities and the cultural changes occurred in Tehran in the fifties and especially the strong secularization and nationalization policy promoted by the monarchy. Living in Oudlājān had

¹²³ Karen L. Pliskin, The Chador as a Symbol of Fear during Khomeini's Insurrection, *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 18, (2009): 125–139, esp. 126.

¹²⁴ This is a specific kind of chador that covers the entire woman's body, head, and face, especially in outdoor. it was the most used during the Qajar era. Nowadays, only conservative women wear it. For a complete discussion on the subject see: Faegheh Shirazi, The Veiling Issue in 20th Century Iran in Fashion and Society, Religion, and Government, *Religions* 10, no. 8, (2019):461-492.

¹²⁵ Personal interview with Shehrazād, Rome January 2020. My translation from Persian.

¹²⁶ Pliskin, The Chador as a Symbol, 126.

guaranteed the cohesiveness and identity of the Jewish community, a sentiment that was constructed of a combination of elements from Judaism and a strong sense of belonging to the history and culture of Iran. The Jewishness of the people of Oudlājān was strictly related to their Persian heritage and there was a constant influence of the Persian culture in their daily practices. As stated by Orit Carmeli in his essay, the material culture of the Jews of Iran, indicated that they had a continual interchange with their Muslim fellows. This can be seen in the adoption of different elements from their daily life: for example, the Jews were deeply superstitious, an aspect marked by the prominent use of amulets produced for various occasions, like weddings, circumcisions, or childbirths. Moreover, the Jews used to practice the *ziyarat*, the ritual pilgrimage to their holy sites in Iran, marking a significant difference with the traditional Jewish culture. Until that moment, the life of the Iranian Jews was set into these two elements, their *Iranianess* and their Jewishness, an aspect that had to be preserved and taught to the next generations. During the reign of the late Shah these two elements seemed to be in contrast: indeed, Iranians of all faiths were expected to assimilate the new idea of national identity, sponsored by the late Shah. As already argued, it was an identity based on Persian heritage, language, and culture, which was promoting uniformity and secularization. With regard to women (outside of the young, educated generation), their integration into the new Iranian society was not immediate: the Shah's policy impacted their lives in a stronger way and their integration into the new concept of national identity took longer. For them it was hard to find their way into a society where masculinity was still an integral part of its construction. Moreover, since they were still living most of their time inside their homes, women struggled to fully integrate into the new modern Tehrani society. In particular, Jewish women out of Oudlājān had to fight against a society that was increasingly eroding its religious values. Indeed, being a modern woman of Tehran meant the abandoning of Jewish rituals and the embracement of a new hybrid culture, which gave the young generation of women the possibility to be fully part of the Shah's project and to fully participate in the construction of a new Iran were everyone could feel as 'Iranian citizens.' Especially men and the young generation of women embraced the modernisation and the secularization policy of the monarch. The sense of place they shared in that period was based on the sense of belonging to the Iranian nation, in the constant identification with the land and also with the figure of the Shah. Eitan argues:

I perfectly remember the Shah's birthday; it was winter and in Tehran was snowing. I remember that I was 7-year-old: we were waiting for the Shah to pass with his Benz. Every five meters there was a boy holding the Iranian flag. I remember that there was this constant identification with the Shah. But I actually do not know if my parents really thought the same¹²⁷.

Sometimes the assimilation was so strong to alienate them from their past. Hakakian, while talking about his uncle, writes: «he was so assimilated, so certain of his prospects in Iran that he even insured Muslims»¹²⁸. Al-e Ahmad, a writer and member of the Tudeh, made a publication in 1962 called *Gharbzadeg*, in which he criticized the introduction, into the Iranian culture, of new Western models that

¹²⁷ Personal interview with Eitan, Rome September 2019. My translation from Italian.

¹²⁸ Hakakian *Journey from the Land of No*, 51.

were changing the society as a whole. He argued that the assimilation of western-values and models would have brought to an inevitable loss of the peculiarities of the Iranian society and its traditions.

As we will analyse later on this work, the abandonment of Oudlājān also increased the generational differences, between the young society and the old generation of Jews, an aspect in which we will see the strong and brave effort of the old generation to preserve the traditions, which were incorporated and crushed by a stronger, powerful, and more attractive urban Iranian culture, which was promoting modernization, uniformity and also secularization.

2.8 Tehran: a city of changes

The profound transformations occurred in Oudlājān, in its physical, demographic, social and cultural aspects, as argued, had a strong impact especially on social relations between the old Jewish residents. Oudlājān had been in the past more than a physical place to live: «it was a way to speak and think, it was a way to be»¹²⁹. Using the categories of the French geographer Fremont, Oudlājān can be defined as the place of stability, whereas greater Tehran as the place of mobility. Indeed, Oudlājān represented that stable place in which the Jews of the neighborhood could establish their space, both as individual and as a collectivity. As Hanachee argues «when people entered into their neighbourhood, they found themselves in a familiar and friendly environment like their own house»¹³⁰. Nevertheless, Oudlājān was a physical place with a great moral value of which its inhabitants felt to be guardians. Tehran, on the contrary, represented the change. As a city dominated by the «metropolitanization»¹³¹, Tehran was the symbol of discontinuity with the past. For this reason, many Jews, especially old women, struggled to feel Tehran, the city in which their aspiration became real, as their own. This was due to different reasons.

First of all, women's daily life inside Oudlājān was a repetitive model of standard behaviours, where everything was well-known and trusted. Women were used to do shopping in the same grocery all day and every local narrow street of Oudlājān was intensively connected with their daily routine. Their new life, in what I have already defined a new modern and westernized Tehran, was constructed of a succession of new cultural models that women struggled to feel as their own. In this regard, many respondents argued that one of the most important characteristics of the new quarters in greater Tehran was the construction of new shopping malls and big markets. This was a big change for women, who were responsible for the grocery in Oudlājān. The shopping rituals had also a deep meaning in terms of the unity of the community, since it was one of the most important moments of gathering for the women of Oudlājān. The local merchants, of which we spoke extensively in the previous chapter, are one of the things that the women of Oudlājān would have missed the most when they moved to the new neighbourhoods in the north of Tehran. Shamsi told me that for many mothers and grandmothers this change was so hard to dealing with that they preferred to continue shopping in Oudlājān, organizing visits to the ruined neighbourhood on a weekly basis. Mohsen, in this regard, recalls:

¹²⁹ Personal interview with Asal, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

¹³⁰ Hanachee and Rezaei, *Living in a Historical Neighborhood*, 24.

¹³¹ Fremont, *Vi piace la geografia*, p. 95.

My maternal grandmother could not shop anywhere else except Oudlājān. I lived with her for four years, since we moved out of our neighbourhood, and every Friday she went back to Oudlājān to do shopping and to meet people. She never wanted to stop doing that until she could find out in Tehran the same goods and especially the same people. She stopped just when she was too old to continue with this.¹³²

Similarly Asal remembers:

Many of my uncles and aunts moved out of Oudlājān after the 1950s. However, they use to come back to Oudlājān every week to buy Kosher food and to shop there. The same did my grandmother when she moved to *khiobun-e Roosvelt*, way from Oudlājān. Every week she went to Sarechal to shop and then she came back home full of shopping bags. As far as I know, a lot of people did the same for a lot of years. Unfortunately, this tradition has been lost over time, especially when our grandmothers were no longer able to go to Oudlājān. At that time, many Jews started opening Jewish stores in different part of Tehran, where there were *Mullahs* killing chickens. In 1950 there were still a lot of Kosher restaurants and kosher shops in greater Tehran. Gradually, nobody started paying attention on this, especially us, the young generation. With the death of our grandmothers, our traditions also died. We were too busy living our lives in Tehran to preserve them.¹³³

My interviewees told me that, despite Tehran had given them great opportunities, they did not want to forget their past in the Oudlājān quarter, which was mostly defined as joyful and familiar. Moreover, over time, retracing the memory of the past in Oudlājān became a necessity, in order not to get lost in a reality, like that of the capital, which had become alienating and, as defined by Shamsi, «placeless»¹³⁴. Dorit says:

When we started understanding that what we had left was more than a physical space, because it was somehow the loosing of an identity and a community, we started looking back at our past in the quarter and to the places of Oudlājān with a sentiment of nostalgia¹³⁵.

2.8.1 Tehran: an alienating environment

All these changes, at least at the beginning and especially for the old generation, emphasized women's insecurity and unsettling, the feeling of vulnerability. For many of these women the abandonment of the neighbourhood created a mixture of «*bim va amid*»¹³⁶ (hope and fear). There was, certainly, hope for a better future, but at the same time 'the unknown' feared many women. Indeed, until that time their home and their quarter had stimulated the nourishing of a 'sense of place', which provided stability for women. Moreover, Oudlājān had been fundamental for the creation of women's identity, which was based on tradition and on the perpetration of their role within the community. These ideas were in contrast with the ambitions of the new generation, for whom was easier to find in Tehran their ideal

¹³² Personal online interview with Mohsen, December 2020.

¹³³ Personal interview with Asal, Tehran, November 2019.

¹³⁴ Persona interview with Shamsi, November 2019.

¹³⁵ Persona interview with Dorit, November 2019.

¹³⁶ Haroun Yashayaei, *Ruzi che esm-e khod rā dānestam*, (Tehran: Shahab Sagheb, 2017), 17.

environment through which build their new role in the Tehrani society. Dorit, in this regard, argues:

The outside was a more prestigious place to live and promised prosperity and equality with the larger community. Moreover, there was a stigma attached to living in the quarter. At the same time, living out of the quarter was more isolating for the older people, like my grandmother, for example. Since women's lives centred around the home, they lost the connection with other Jewish women. For the younger generation, like myself at the time, it promised more opportunities¹³⁷.

Tehran was presented for the elderly as a city full of contradictions and irrepressible vitality, in which it was difficult to embrace one's place and to seek their own personal dimension, as it happened in Oudlājān in the past. The old inhabitants of the quarter, who were strongly affected by economic, urban, and social changes, found themselves deprived of that deep bond with the neighbourhood, something that had been built over generations. For them, it was more difficult to feel part of Tehran, especially because the city lacked all those historical references and identities that had characterized the life of the Jews in Oudlājān. Moreover, during the last decades, Tehran became increasingly populated and the immigration, together with the commercial exchanges with the West, dramatically increased the size of the city. This aspect, together with the rhythm of life and the social structure of the city made the life not easy. In particular in Tehran the Jews could not find any communitarian dimension, as was done in the past in the old Jewish quarter. Indeed, in Oudlājān «the vivacity and the richness of communal social life represent other motivations for 'staying together' and preserving communal cohesion»¹³⁸.

Another fundamental characteristic of Tehran was that, as previously stated, the city was under perpetual change. Indeed, the policy of the late Shah was aimed at the urban renewal of the city that affected all districts, including the historic ones. In only a few decades, Tehran became a dynamic conurbation, oriented to international trade and with the aspirations of a European city. The aim of regaining the capital as a residential location and as a commercial centre was carried out through the cancellation and a subversion of the local realities. These changes also affected all the society that had to be renewed and transformed on the model of the city. The creation of a homogeneous society had to pass also through the creation of a new urban culture which had to be religiously and ethnically homogeneous. The change in the topography of the avenues, which were linked to the Empire, was another example of the «standardization of society»¹³⁹, which the people of Tehran were undergoing. This variation suggests that over time Tehran lost its past peculiarities, in particular its multicultural face. Unlike what happens to the metropolis, which are by nature the place of plurality, Tehran was the space where the diversity of the Iranian society began to get lost. This was due to the political action of the late Shah, who, in some way, tried to erase the plural identity dimension of the capital, in favour of a homologated society.

In those years we witnessed, even among the Jews of Tehran, a fundamental transition from an identity historically built on a sense of personal belonging (being Iranian Jews) to a more controversial monolithic identity, which was sponsored and

¹³⁷ Personal interview with Dorit, November 2019.

¹³⁸ Anne-Sophie Vivier-Muresan, *Communitarian Neighborhoods and Religious Minorities in Iran: A Comparative Analysis*, *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 5 (December, 2007): 593-603, esp. 603.

¹³⁹ Giorgetti, *Spazio vissuto*.

supported at the State level. Tehran was therefore a cosmopolitan city, but the policy of Mohammad Reza Shah in favour of the Iranization of society brought out its strongly exclusory character: the diversity was recognized mainly at the official level but then assimilated into an identified identity. There was actually no desire to incorporate into the idea of Iranianess the other identities, such as the Jewish religious one.

In the first chapter, we had the opportunity to talk about the plurality of voices that characterized the neighbourhood and the strong multicultural dimension of Oudlājān. In the interviews, when talking about the abandonment of Oudlājān and the life in the great Tehran, this aspect of the district was reiterated. In all the interviewees I was able to find an absolutely positive perception of the cultural diversity that was breathed in Oudlājān, which was also perceived as a richness, to which afterwards people would look with nostalgia. The memories of Oudlājān, which was described as a multicultural space, give an image of the neighbourhood that becomes a mirror of an Iran that is by its nature built on ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic differences. Tehran, on the contrary, appeared «devoid of colours»¹⁴⁰.

The Iranization of the society was eroding the ethnic and religious plurality of Iran, by creating, more than before, strict boundaries of the Iranian nation. The creation of an urban centre like Tehran, the eroding of the old quarters, and the incorporation of minorities into a monolithic national identity were employed as a way through which improving the Iranization of the country. I was struck by a definition of Tehran that was given by an old Polish Jewish refugee, Rabbi Josef Gliksberg, who was interviewed by Farian Sabahi in her documentary 'The children of Tehran'¹⁴¹. Already in 1941, the city, as described by the man, «appeared like a normal city [...] But not religious». What immediately leaps to the eyes was that Tehran, a big and young metropolis, was fully urbanized and modern but with just few important religious buildings and monuments. The secularization of the urban space had repercussions on the social life of its inhabitants and also influenced the perception they had of the city. Actually, Mohammad Reza Shah imposed an anti-religious regime on a religious people, forcing them to live religion only in the seclusion of their homes.¹⁴² In view of the above assertions, it is not surprising that the image that my respondents gave me about Tehran was that of an unauthentic city. The new rich quarters of Tehran, the new urban culture that was purified from religion, the over-urbanization of the capital, the increase gap between the rich and the poor and the north and the south of the capital contributed on the creation of an «alienating landscape»¹⁴³. What emerged from the interviews was that Tehran lost its past lightness and brightness, becoming the symbol of a monolithic-state sponsored country. In addition, as Yousef reports, in Tehran «our history was missing»¹⁴⁴. He means that him, as a Jew, did not perceive the historical link that would allow the old community of Oudlājān to fully integrate into the new city and to feel Tehran as its own. In this regard, he argues that «the Jews were losing

¹⁴⁰ Personal interview with Asal, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

¹⁴¹ Farian Sabahi – I bambini di Teheran (2018) – available online at: <https://vimeo.com/244229425/cf343eafde>

¹⁴² Riccardo Cristiano, *Tra lo Scìa e Khomeini. 'Ali Shari'ati: un'utopia soppressa*, (Roma, Jouvence, 2006), 17.

¹⁴³ Amy Mills, *Streets of Memory: Landscape, Tolerance, and National Identity in Istanbul*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 57.

¹⁴⁴ Personal interview with Yousef, Tehran, November 2019.

themselves»¹⁴⁵. Similarly, Farideh Goldin writes:

No one knew then how the 1953 crowing of the Shah by the West, would come to haunt us all. Although not witness to this history, my generation experienced this humiliating loss of self-determination through our parents' memories¹⁴⁶.

In conclusion, according to Armand Frémont, Tehran can be defined an '*espace aliene*'¹⁴⁷. The concept, which was affirmed with the industrial revolution, was theorized by Fremont in Chapter II of his work. For Frémont the '*espace aliene*' is characterized by a loss of link between man and everyday space.

2.9 Women and the perpetuation of tradition: saving the community of Oudlājān

The alienating environment of Tehran and the spread of the secularization also within the Iranian Jews of the capital, was eroding the traditional values of the old community. It is in this context that, in an age of disruptive secularism, the old Jewish women generation worked hard to preserve and maintain their Iranian Jewish culture intact. My respondents agreed to give mothers and grandmothers the role of saviours of the community's heritage and of the Iranian Jewish identity. In particular, these women, who had lived a difficult transition from Oudlājān to greater Tehran, tried vigorously to reproduce a sense of community with their daily practice toward the family and the children, even though in a secularized environment like the one of the Iranian capital. Their efforts, as argued by Asal, led to the survival of all the old traditional norms that they were able to jealously guard in the private sphere.

The older generation of women of Oudlājān deeply kept their traditions also because their importance within the Jewish community was due to their religious performance at home. Since centuries, the role of women has been the Jewish community was the perpetuation of the Iranian Jewish culture, ensuring its material and spiritual survival. Less interest in religious life could lead to a loss of their role in the society, whereas the domestic space meant a perpetuation of the social order or the social rule. Indeed, at least until the 1950s and the mass education of the young generation, women were confined to the domestic sphere, and this was a spatial but also a social control on their identity. In this regard, it is important to remark that for Jewish women 'home' was somehow their source of belonging, identity, and security. This specifically because the fact of staying at home, performing their domestic roles, gave them entry to the religious sphere, from which they were officially excluded outside (as I have already mentioned, they could not attend religious ceremonies in the synagogue and were excluded from studying the Torah). Therefore, their home represented for them a source of stability, cohesion, and authenticity. When the Jews left Oudlājān, the 'home' and every action related to the domestic sphere, became, even more than before, a «marker of the social position and status»¹⁴⁸ of these women. In this regard, it can be argued that the home became somehow a place of resistance. Indeed, women out

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem

¹⁴⁶ Goldin, *Wedding Song*, 42.

¹⁴⁷ Fremont, *Ti piace la geografia?*.

¹⁴⁸ Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity, and Place*, 92.

of the Oudlājān quarter, had to fight for the material and spiritual survival of the community, for the survival of Jewish traditions, and for the survival of all those cultural norms that had contributed to the emergence of their social role. Therefore, in this period of estrangement and alienation, the home continued to have an important role in the construction of their identity, especially for older women. Eitan, in this regard, argues:

The Iranian Jewish woman has never worked in her life; she only took care of the house: cooking, working, bringing the children to school, educating them, and helping them in school. Everything! Clearly, everything depended on the education by the mother and how much she could teach her children. Since she never went out and had no contact with the outside reality, she was not contaminated and continued to maintain a religious life in the family. Whereas my father, for example, was out, eating non-Kosher food, doing everything that was forbidden at home¹⁴⁹.

Despite the attempt of homologize the society by the Shah, women assured the perpetuation of the Jewish culture in Iran, thanks to the fact that they still performed a Jewish life at home. Religion had always been a private affair for the women of Oudlājān and had always been the centre of their life. Indeed, as stated by Soomekh «although women were excluded from the traditional Iranian Jewish cultural domain of the synagogue and Torah study, they cultivated a robust religious life by turning their day-to day profane activities into sacred acts»¹⁵⁰. For these women, religion represented first of all their individual and collective identity. Moreover, it also meant ‘relationship’, as a care activity towards the family; nonetheless it was, above all, an intimate and domestic daily practice, carried out through a ritualization of acts and activities that often did not coincide with the most rigid religious dictates.

The preparation of food, according to the Jewish dietary law, was one of the ‘sacred acts’ that women continued to perform even when they moved to greater Tehran. Undeniably, this daily common act ensured the preservation of women’s role within the family and also within the dispersed community: the food became, as suggested by Shamsi, the symbol of continuity with the past traditions and a deep and intimate moment of preservation of the Jewish culture. Outside the private sphere, no one, especially the new generation, observed the Kashrut. For grandmothers and mother, maintaining a Jewish dietary law inside the family was still a vehicle of praying to God privately and intimately. This simple action became sacral in this period of secularization and estrangement because it was a simple way for «bringing the holy into everyday life»¹⁵¹. The house, once again, became the space of the revolution, where the rules, which were imposed by a society increasingly distant from religion and from traditions, were subverted. In this regard, Saba Soomekh writes that many older women she interviewed «considered each aspect of their domestic world to be holy. They felt that cooking, cleaning, keeping Kosher and observing the Jewish holidays had enabled them to get closer to God and to maintain a Jewish environment for their families»¹⁵².

¹⁴⁹ Personal interview with Eitan, Rome September 2019. My translation from Italian.

¹⁵⁰ Saba Soomekh, Iranian Jewish Women: Domesticating Religion and Appropriating Zoroastrian Religion in Ritual Life, *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 18, (2009): 13-38, esp. 13.

¹⁵¹ Soomekh, *From the Shahs to Los Angeles*, 24.

¹⁵² Soomekh, Iranian Jewish Women, 20.

Inside their home, women still tried to celebrate and honour every Jewish festivity, with the same deepness it happened in the past. Roja Hakakian in her book recalls the memories she keeps about the celebration of the *Aid-e Nissan*, the Passover. She writes:

To honour the ancient Israelites 'hasty departure from Egypt, we hastened ourselves, rallying around mother, to wage on our crusade. [...] Our saviour, our seasonal Moses, our year-round job, mother, with an out-stretched arm, lamenting her migraine, led us in battle against dirt¹⁵³.

The kitchen was, like in Oudlājān, the centre of these celebrations, like a microcosm where to find a 'sign of the divine' in everything. Roja Hakakian states:

We saw signs of the divine: The red sea at the foot of our thawing refrigerator, as golden shafts of light, emanating from its open door, parted the gloomy fluorescence of the kitchen. The gas burner, which we wheeled out of the storage, was our occasional burning bush. In a vat over it, we boiled water and dipped perfectly clean dishes to scald away any trace of the 'non-Kosher for Passover' food.¹⁵⁴

The *Seder*, which commemorates the story of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt, was still widely practiced in Tehran during the Shah's period. The Seder was a ritual that led to a reunification of the extended family, while keeping a multiple generation of the family, that in Oudlājān was living together, in the same house once again. The mothers had the role to perpetuate this tradition, while retelling the story around the Passover *sofreh* and deciding the details of the ordeal.

Mothers and grandmothers had the fundamental role of preserving these traditions for the survival of the Jewish community. In particular, they strongly tried to perpetuate these traditions while teaching them to their daughters, who were, in general, more attracted by the Shah's secularization policy and practiced less rituals. These legacies of memory and traditions concerned, first of all, all most important Jewish rituality, such as preparation of food and keeping *kosher*. It was vital to keep up these old traditions in order to understand the importance of preserving the Iranian Jewish identity and to teach it to the next generation. Mehri Niknam writes about the role of her grandmother in the formation of her Iranian Jewish identity. She states:

My grandmother, a devout Jew, gave me my Jewish identity by telling me the stories of the bible, how the Jews cook and what the Jewish festivals were about¹⁵⁵.

When I had the chance to talk with Shamsi about the role of his mother in the family, she uses these meaningful words:

My mother grew up in Oudlājān but she received a strict religious upbringing that originated from her family's town, Hamedan. She lived with these

¹⁵³ Hakakian *Journey from the Land of No*, 44.

¹⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 45.

¹⁵⁵ Mehri Niknam, A Jewish Childhood in Iran, *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 28, no.2, (1995): 99-101, esp. 99.

religious norms all her life. She tried hard to strongly imbibe in our minds the love and knowledge of Judaism. Obviously, the level was not so high, since she was not an educated woman. However, I must admit that she really gave us everything we needed to not forget who we were. It was my mother, with her perseverance, who maintained religiosity in our family. I think this is a common feature of every good Iranian Jewish mother. The figure of the mother is really important in Jewish culture because of her prominent role in educating her children to religion. There are many poems or praises, which we used to read on Friday evenings during the Sabbath, in honour of women. This because it is the woman who plays a fundamental role in the Jewish family.¹⁵⁶

The perpetration of traditions from mothers to daughters also concerned the legacy of a system of values related to ‘women’s duties’: being a good Jewish wife and maintaining Jewish values, such as being *najib*¹⁵⁷. The complete devotion to their husband and the extended family was still crucial to maintain the family order: although the abandonment of Oudlājān imposed a new way of life (no longer multigenerational houses, unlike in the past into the *old Jewish quarter*), family relations were still based on a hierarchical system, especially between the bride and her mother-in-law.

Anyway, thanks to mothers and especially grandmothers (those generations of uneducated women), the Jewish religious culture was not completely lost or forgotten, and this allowed the continuation of the Iranian Jewish identity also after the revolution, when religiosity got a new role also in the public sphere. As a pillar of the family, the woman had guaranteed the material and spiritual survival of the community.

Eitan, during our interview, says:

I kept my religiosity thanks to my mother. Thanks to her I knew I was Jew, that I didn't have to eat meat and milk outside. My father was different: he wasn't religious at all. Perhaps I saw him at the temple only once, and it was just for only one hour¹⁵⁸.

2.10 The new generation of Iranian Jews of Tehran

For the new generation of Iranian Jews born in Oudlājān, the abandonment of the Jewish quarter represented the opportunity to become part of the Iranian society as a whole, to know its rhythms and daily life and to share its aspirations. Although Oudlājān was a multicultural neighbourhood, the spaces of the quarter that the Jews used to frequent were distinguished from those of the other communities by mainly practical needs, such as schools and markets. In greater Tehran, where there was not anymore, a Jewish concentration, the new generation started sharing, more than ever, the same shops and streets with the other communities, especially with Muslims. The two communities were «intermingled in public spaces throughout the city»¹⁵⁹, which served as places of integration and dialogue.

¹⁵⁶ Personal interview with Shamsi, Tehran, November 2019.

¹⁵⁷ This word can be translated as pure and virginal.

¹⁵⁸ Personal interview with Eitan, Rome September 2019.

¹⁵⁹ Arlene Dallalfar, *Synagogues and Sacred Rituals in Tehran: An Ethnographic Analysis of Judeo-Persian Identities and Spaces*, ed., Gharipour Mohammad, *Synagogues in the Islamic World: Architecture, Design and Identity*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017): 185-204, esp. 186.

The new generation of Iranian Jews hardly tried to engage with the Iranian majority in two ways; in the political arena, they embraced the Iranian nationalism via a Monarchist narrative that was erected by the two Pahlavi. In this regard, the Shah himself represented their *Iranianess* in many ways and they strongly started identifying with him and his policy.¹⁶⁰ Habib Levy states:

For the Jews in Iran, for whom even the constitution was not successful in bringing about a change in their miserable existence, the rule of Reza Shah, a great king, was a great revolutionary improvement of the status of the Jewish freedom and welfare in Iran. For the Jews, the period of the Great Sha's Reign was like that of the Great Cyrus and the reign of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, was like that of Darius the first¹⁶¹.

In the social sphere the new generation worked hard to improve their economic situation, which could elevate them and felt equally part of an Iranian state that had to be progressive and modern. In this context, young Jewish girls had a very social role, through which they sought their place in society. These young women who had grown up in Oudlājān and attended high schools and universities in Tehran soon joined the social movements of their Iranian colleagues and compatriots to demand an increase in women's rights. The new women's emancipation movement, which raised, as part of the modern policy of Mohamad Reza Shah, since the first decades of his reign, promoted the growth of demands related to woman's sphere. Besides child marriage, polygamy and labour market, the main demand was related to women's education. This demand was acquired by the creation of new public schools all over the country, but especially in Tehran. The rise of public schools for women initiated already in the first decades of the twentieth century, with an extensive interpretation of article 19 of the Supplementary Fundamental Role, which brought to the opening of the first girls' public school in Iran. Shahrzād, who had experienced a different life because of the prominent position of her father in the court of the two Pahlavi and who had lived all her life out of Oudlājān, remembered:

There was a lot of illiteracy among Jewish girls in the 1950s. When I attended Kurosh Jewish school, there were students who were 22 when I was 6 or 7. And for many of them it was the first time they went to school¹⁶².

After the 1950s, there was a great promotion for girls' education, especially in private school. The number of girl students strongly increased all over Iran and in particular in the capital, where the majority of Iranian Jews lived. Illiteracy was more common for the lower class, while the upper class showed a great rate of women's literacy, and in Tehran this rate was one of the highest in the country.¹⁶³ As reported by Sarshar, among Iranian Jewish males, aged 6-50, the literary rate was over 90 percent. The rate among female was 70% percent. These percentage was higher than the overall Iranian rate.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Meir Litvak, *Constructing Nationalism in Iran: From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic*, (London: Routledge, 2017), 199.

¹⁶¹ Habib Levy, *Tārik-e yahud-e Irān*, (Tehran 1960), 961.

¹⁶² Personal interview of January 2020, Rome.

¹⁶³ Paidar, *Women and the Political*, 31.

¹⁶⁴ Sarshar, *Jewish Communities*, 70.

Schools like Kurosh¹⁶⁵, which had a specific programme for girls, were hosting the future Jewish female community of Tehran, the next young, educated generation, which will mark a clear distinction with the previous generation. As stated by Golding, «in the previous years, poverty, oppression, lack of education, restriction of mobility and the absence of a women's literary tradition, kept most Iranian Jewish women silent and invisible»¹⁶⁶. She continues saying «while my grandfather was a Dayan (a learned man who could read Hebrew texts), my grandmother, wise in many ways, never learned to read or write even her own name»¹⁶⁷.

The abandonment of the old quarter and the integration into the Tehrani society allowed the young girls' generation to achieve new important goals: first of all, a lot of Jewish girls started attending universities in Tehran. The majority of these girls were educated more on «traditionally feminine subjects»¹⁶⁸, like history and literature. In general, they also started to fully integrate into the labour market, occupying positions that were more 'suitable for women': like being a teacher or a nurse.

The educational system contributed strongly to the formation of a young Tehrani Jewish generation, which enthusiastically embraced the rhetoric of the nation, showing a strong identification with the Pahlavi policy. The women's identification with the nation had initiated also during the reign of Reza Shah. A symbolic feature of this is, as argued by Paidar, the adoption of the term Iran as a «female name»¹⁶⁹. This strong identification was at the time shared mostly by Muslim women of the upper class and young, educated Jewish women, who had their fathers working for the Shah. For the *mahalleh*-girls this was not an option. But later, with Mohammed Reza Shah, the identification was intensified and embraced uniformly also by the new women's society.

2.10.1 Associationism

The new Tehrani girl generation was also involved in political and social activism, more than ever, following a general new approach on political activism that was stimulated by a freedom of expression that seemed to characterize the first reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, at least at the beginning. Indeed, many young Iranian Jews joined the Tudeh party (which was outlawed in 1957), a communist movement established by a group of Marxist men who had been jailed by Reza Shah. Many Jewish women were attracted by the program of the Tudeh party, which addressed to the safeguard of human rights and with a specific programme related to women, especially for those from the working class. In 1943 the 'Organization of Iranian Women' (*tashkilāt-e zanān-e irān*) a branch of the Tudeh party was established.

¹⁶⁵ The Kūrosh (Pers. Cyrus) School in Tehran was largely the idea of two Zionist activists, Farājallāh Ḥakīm and Dr. Ḥabīb Levy. With the help of Ismā'īl Ḥayy, Azīz Elqānyān, Rabbi 'Azīzullāh ben Yūnā Na'im, and a few others, the Jewish community of Tehran founded the school as an elementary institution, but soon expanded it to include the high school grades. The founding of the Kūrosh School was a highly significant act. Its curriculum, in contrast to that of the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools, emphasized Hebrew and Persian rather than French. Its mission was to foster... Orly R. Rahimiyan, Kūrosh School, in: *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, Executive Editor Norman A. Stillman. Consulted online on 29 January 2021

¹⁶⁶ Goldin, *Wedding Song*, 89.

¹⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 91.

¹⁶⁸ Paidar, *Women and the Political*, 164.

¹⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 116.

The organization was banned in 1949. In 1951, the party rebuilt the organization using a new name, the 'Democratic Association of Iranian Women' (*tashkilāt-e democratic-e zanān-e irān*).¹⁷⁰ The aims of the association, as declared by the Article 6 of the Tudeh Constitution, were all related to the improvement of the social and political situation of women in Iran. They demanded a specific policy related to the cultural development of women and an effort to struggle against women's illiteracy, which was still quite high in that period, especially in rural areas and for the poorer classes. Moreover, this programme was related to women's working class, demanding for an equal pay, and asking for the establishing of a welfare programme. A lot of young Jewish girls were also engaged with the Jewish Ladies Association, which was struggling for welfare services and to raise the standard of health services and education.

In general, the majority of women's political activism and the most important goal of these organizations was revolved on the Universal Suffrage. The Shah was highly motivated to grant the right to vote for women, because this responded to his modernization project.

2.10.2 *The difficulties of the new generation*

The political and social activism was, as reported by Dorit, another way for the young Jews to feel being active Iranian citizens. She reports:

We wanted to fight for our own rights as women citizens. Before that we led other people fighting for us, because we did not have enough strength to do it alone. We wanted to take control of the situation.

The strong integration into the society of many young Jews and their desire to be fully recognized as Iranians contributed to marginalize other previous forms of identity, such as the religious one. Being an active part of this new modern and on-going society meant being Iranian citizens in the public but maintaining their religiousness at home. This identification disaffected the Iranian young Jews from their culture, weakened their roots and drastically altered their identity, causing a sort of alienation from their traditions and religion. Soomekh argues that «most of young women of the Shah's generation embraced the Shah's policies, which paved their way for educational and vocational opportunities. As a result, they gave up many of their rituals that the mothers had practiced, such as tomb pilgrimage»¹⁷¹. Being a modern woman led this generation to abandon their own culture, following mainly Western cultural models and transforming them into new cultural models, replacing them with those of the Persian tradition. Hakakian reports:

They accepted no homegrown hero, followed the lead of no guru who was not blond. If they were going to learn about the power of love, it was not from Rumi but Roger Moore. If they were going to emulate anyone it would not be Imam Ali, but John Wayne. If they were to climb anything, it would not be Mount Sinai, but the Empire State Building¹⁷².

¹⁷⁰ Paidar, *Women and the Political*, 124-125.

¹⁷¹ Soomekh, *Iranian Jewish Women*, 14.

¹⁷² Hakakian *Journey from the Land of No*, 61.

For women the family preferred Jewish school to preserve them from a full integration in the Iranian society and to preserve their Jewishness. Soomekh argues that many Jews sent their children to Jewish schools «because there was too much freedom under the Shah»¹⁷³ and the integration on a Muslim society could provoke (as actually happened) the alienation of Jewish's identity. The goal of these religious schools was still to educate young women for their role within the family and the house.

As argued by Soomekh, the improvement of the social status of women was often blocked by their own families, especially the mothers. All the women she interviewed were never encouraged to work outside, but their duty was still the marriage and the family. So there has been still a cultural imposition that kept most of women out of the social environment of the capital (at least in the first period of their life in the great Tehran), while they grow up as secular and modern women, as the generation who «had cast off religion»¹⁷⁴. Even though they lost their religiosity and were less carefully on their women's duties, their place was still within their family role. No one of the interviews showed me a sentiment of anger with their family. Nevertheless, everyone tried to justify the behaviours of their family and especially of the mothers with the fear they had about losing completely their tradition. It was an imposition justified by the necessity of the safeguard of a community that was losing pieces since they left the quarter.

Going to the conclusions, it can be argued that the abandonment of Oudlājān was, generally speaking, a happy moment for the young generation, but they also faced an identity crisis: they had left the quarter with high hope as an opportunity to overcome their isolation and begin a new life, far from the life their mothers had lived for years. This was the young, educated generation who had completed high school and successfully attended universities. This generation of young Iranian Jewish women faced also different problems, especially because they still had to fight against stereotypes, since the policy of the Shah did not impact the society. For women this was much stronger, because they had to fight with another enemy: a patriarchal society where women were still confined to their role as Jewish women.

The new Tehrani girls' generation was somehow living in a contradictory situation: it was the generation of clothes and makeup, of the female magazine *Zan-e Emruz*, but they were still constrained in a society where «being pure was the ultimate virtue»¹⁷⁵; therefore, despite their full assimilation into modern Iranian society, motherhood still remained «the only mark of their femaleness»¹⁷⁶. The new generation was living a contradiction, performing a modern life but remaining anchored in their traditional role, the one that the family had imposed or handed down to them.

Over time, these girls have been able to appreciate their dual identity as Jewish and Iranian youth and pass it on to their own children. They stubbornly clung to the memories and teachings of women of the older generation and guarded the treasures of a century-old tradition. Many of them continue to live in Tehran today and, like the women I met, they continue to live with the awareness of belonging to an ancient community. Some of these girls, even though they moved away from Iran, have been able to give back to their mothers and grandmothers the great gift

¹⁷³ Soomekh, *From the Shahs to Los Angeles*, 43.

¹⁷⁴ Hakakian *Journey from the Land of No*, 61.

¹⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 80.

¹⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 74.

they had given them, the one of having preserved their religious traditions. In this regard, many Iranian Jewish mothers and grandmothers found their new lives through a new generation of Iranian-Jewish writers who speak as daughters for their own mothers¹⁷⁷, while «restoring the female ancestral words»¹⁷⁸.

¹⁷⁷ Judith L. Goldstein, The Tear Jar, *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 18, (Fall 2009): 71-86.

¹⁷⁸ Farideh Goldin, Introduction to Nashim, *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 18, (Fall 2009): 5-12, esp. 8.

Chapter 3

Oudlajān today: a quarter of belongingness

3.1 The 1979 Revolution and the government's approach toward the Jews

The social balance that was partially achieved by Mohammad Reza Shah's centralizing policy was torn apart by the growing discontent that hovered among the Iranian population in the early 1970s. The legendary figure of the new national hero, Ayatollāh Ruhollah Khomeyni, was able to attract almost the entire Iranian population around him. The Iranian society was, more than ever, united by a common desire of justice, freedom, and brotherhood. The Shiite nature that was acquired by the new state at the dawn of the new Islamic Republic generated an inevitable sociocultural revolution, which marked an epochal turning point in post-revolutionary Iran. In those early years, various difficult events profoundly undermined the social equilibrium of the country, which experienced a period of deep social and economic crisis.

3.1.1 The Jews and the 1979 Revolution

The Jewish community took part in the revolutionary movement, as an integral component of the society that was perceiving the dissatisfaction with the situation of the country in that period. Indeed, at the time of the revolution the Jewish community in Tehran was an active part of the Iranian society. As argued by Sternfeld, who has extensively worked on the Jews and 1979 Revolution, «this integration manifested itself in the Jew's upward social mobility, their visibility in the public sphere and their prominent place in the Iranian economy, science, and various political projects»¹.

The discontent with the regime of the Pahlavi had grown in the last years, and it was mainly due to an increasingly repressive government policy that reached its peak with the coup of Mossadegh in 1953. It was in that period that the last Pahlavi regime started being considered as 'oppressive'². On the contrary, the ideals of the revolutionaries seemed to be inspired by principles such as freedom and brotherhood that had a good grip on the population.

Of course, as for all the components of the vast Iranian society, also within the Jews there were supporters and opponents of the revolutionary movement. The Jewish supporters of the revolution found in the newspaper Tamuz the way to express their dissatisfaction against the regime. Tamuz, of which publication started in July 1979, was a weekly newspaper (it was named after the Hebrew month of

¹ Lior Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth Century Iran*, (Stanford University Press, 2019), 92.

² Personal interview with Yousef, November 2019.

July) that became a magazine with a high circulation in all the country. The main goal of this new publication was to be a bridge between the Jewish community and the other Iranian people. Tamuz was founded by the *jāme'e-ye rowshanfekrān-e yahudi-ye irān*³, 'The Organization of Iranian Jewish Intellectuals', which was established to express the Jewish discontent with the monarchical regime. In this regard, Karmel Melamed recalls:

We formed this group to show the rest of the people in Iran that we Jews were not woven from a different fabric of society than other Iranians, but that we also supported the new government's preferred goals for democracy and freedom⁴.

In an editorial of 1981, Tamuz celebrated the Jewish involvement in the Revolution as follow:

From the beginning of the year 1357 (1798) a group of Iranian Jews has participated in the great movement against imperialism and dictatorship. In the last month of Shahrivar 1357 a group of Jews joined the protests for the first time under an Iranian Jewish banner, and this group, in the month of Azar 1357 met with the late Ayatollāh Taleqani, and announced their common goals⁵

The ideals pursued by the community and also enunciated by Tamuz, such as brotherhood and freedom, had been matured after years of long associationism, especially among the ranks of the radical left. This associationism, in student organization and various opposition movements like the Tudeh, led to the creation of what Sternfeld defines as a «generation of Jewish Revolutionaries»⁶, which played an essential role in the victory of the Revolution of 1979. For this part of the Jewish community, which was operating especially in big cities like in the capital Tehran, the revolutionary movement was a necessary step in the construction of a new Iran, where to revive socialist theories. The definition Tamuz gave of the Revolution as a «great movement against imperialism and dictatorship»⁷ shows the ideals that were, more than others, igniting the principles of the revolutionaries.

The Organization of Iranian Jewish Intellectuals was a revolutionary movement itself. Indeed, article 3 of the official bylaws of the organization stated:

We encourage active participation in the social life of the Iranian people and the creation of a Jewish society that will struggle shoulder to shoulder with

³ The association was founded in March 1978, when the new generation of progressive Jewish Iranian intellectuals succeeded for the first time in supplanting the established Jewish communal organization. This was replaced by the radical and moderate young intellectuals. See: Orly R. Rahimiyan, *Jāme-yi Rowshanfikrān-i Yahūd-i Irān*, in: *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, Executive Editor Norman A. Stillman. Consulted online on 10 December 2020

⁴ Karmel Melamed, *Escape, exile, rebirth: Iranian Jewish diaspora alive and well in Los Angeles Jewish Journal*. Accessed online in January 2019.

⁵ Editorial, *Fa'aliyat-e seh-saleh-ye jame'eh-ye rowshanfekran-e kalimi-ye Iran*, Tamuz, September 25, 1981. From the translation of Lior Sternfeld, *The Revolution's Forgotten Sons and Daughters: The Jewish Community in Tehran during the 1979 Revolution*, *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 6, (2014): 857-869.

⁶ Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 95.

⁷ Editorial, *Fa'aliyat-e seh-saleh-ye jame'eh-ye rowshanfekran-e kalimi-ye Iran*, Tamuz, September 25, 1981.

our Iranian brothers for the ultimate victory of the revolution and the building of a free and progressive Iran⁸.

Other official bylaws of the association also reflected this need for supporting the creation of a new Iran, which had to be based on new sentiments and ideals. These values were closely linked to nationalism and radical socialism, mixed with both Muslim and Jewish religiosity⁹. Actually, the Organization of Iranian Jewish Intellectuals was born thanks to the collaboration of many Jewish intellectuals with various Muslim Iranian activists. As reported by Sternfeld, «they established a lecture series hosted in local synagogues featuring presentations by secular Muslim advocates of the revolution and high-ranking clerics that were deeply involved in the revolution»¹⁰.

The leftist ideals were underlined by article 5 that reiterated the condemn of the association against any form of imperialism, colonialism and also Zionism. It states:

War against imperialism and any form of colonialism, including Zionism and revealing the relationship between Zionism and world's imperialism. War against any sort of racial discrimination, racism and anti-Semitism¹¹.

Article 6 was, once again, inviting the Jews to advocate the Revolutionary's cause, which Sternfeld defines as a «revolutionary utopia»¹², encouraging them to «adapt to the new reality in Iran, by enjoying all the opportunities to have better conditions to religious and cultural life and welfare of the Iranian Jews»¹³.

The Jewish community also gave a practical support to the revolutionary cause, mainly working to support the protesters, who often sought medical care after the protests and the subsequent reactions of the police. Indeed, the Jewish hospital of Oudlajān, the *Bimārestān-e Sapir* became part of a 'rescue apparatus' that helped many protesters who were attacked by the military forces of the Shah. In particular, during the anti-shah upheavals in 1978 the Sapir hospital acted as a sanctuary for the demonstrators, becoming the symbol of communion between faiths against a common enemy. During the protests, the hospital was mainly busy with welcoming injured patients. In addition, the Jews denied entrance to the hospital when Army officers arrived to arrest the injured patients.

This was possible thanks to the strong collaboration between Ayatollāh Sayyid Mahmud Tāleqāni, who was acting as a leader of the revolutionaries since the exile of Khomeini in Iraq and then France, and the hospital administration. This latter wanted to ensure the salvation of the Jewish community in Iran while openly supporting the Revolution. In the late 1978 Khomeini gave a first public recognition to the hospital, while sending a letter of gratitude to the director of the *Bimārestān-e Sapir*.

⁸ Amnon Netzer Yehudei Iran, Yisrael, ve-ha-republiqah ha-islamit shel iran geshe 26, spring, summer 1980, esp. 49. Cited in: Sternfeld, *The Revolution's Forgotten Sons and Daughters*, 7.

⁹ Sternfeld, *The Revolution's Forgotten Sons and Daughters*, 7.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 6.

¹¹ Netzer Yehudei Iran. Cited in: Sternfeld, *The Revolution's Forgotten Sons and Daughters*, 7.

¹² Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 100.

¹³ Ibidem

This supportive approach of the Jews towards the revolution, as argued by Sternefeld «secured the future of the Jews under the leadership of the revolution»¹⁴, something that would come in handy in the years to come.

3.1.2 *The Jews under the Islamic Republic of Iran*

Despite the support to the Revolution and the official recognition made by Khomeini, during the first years of the new Islamic Republic the Jewish community suffered a difficult situation. Indeed, after the victory of the Revolution in 1979 and the emergence of a new political system in the country, the life of the Jewish community in Iran, which was at the time mostly living in Tehran, was mainly unsecure and uncertain. The Jews of Iran, who have been recognized as Iranian citizens by the 1979 Constitution, were victims, at least initially, of a political strategy that proved to be not very faithful to the principles of brotherhood, friendship, and social justice that were previously enunciated by the Khomeinist rhetoric. Actually, the uncertainty that marked the early years of the Islamic Republic had important repercussions on the attitude towards minorities: the Jewish community was repeatedly accused of spying for foreign powers and of supporting the action of the great Iranian enemy, the State of Israel. This policy of tension and uncertainty contributed to the acceleration towards a social transformation of Iran, in which religion became the centrepiece of the State itself.

The approach that the newly founded State had against the Jews followed more or less the vicissitudes of the Islamic Republic since its foundation in 1979. This approach, which would also have important demographic consequences, can be summarized in three great moments.

The first one, which is related to the early years of the Republic, was characterized by a strong political unpredictability. The newly founded State had to legitimate its power, not only in the domestic context but also internationally. This means that the State had to eliminate all those political and social forces that could undermine its strength and its power. Among these, at the national level, there were the supporters of the late Shah. These people, who were still living in large numbers in the country, could represent a further threat for the salvation of the State. From an international point of view, the most powerful opposition forces were the Western countries and the State of Israel, which had been great allies of the late Pahlavi since his rise to power in 1941. In this context, the instability and the uncertainty that followed the creation of the new State had determined a negative approach also towards the Jews, who were accused to serve Israel and Zionism. The link between Judaism and Zionism had already been underlined by Ayatollāh Taleqani in his sermon in 1962, in which he attacked the Iranian Jewish community to be the enemy of Islam and to seduce Muslim war.¹⁵ After the victory of the Islamic Revolution they started being accused, once again, of collaboration with all the imperialist powers of the West and Israel. Moreover, they were condemned, also publicly, for having supported the Pahlavi regime and for having contributed to the loss of morality that the country suffered due to the deviation from the true Muslim values. These accusations were followed by a wave of confiscations and restrictions of various nature, up to the most dramatic outcome, namely the killing of the political opponents. One of the most traumatic moments that followed the

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 105.

¹⁵ Uriah Furman, Minorities in contemporary Islamist discourse, *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 4, (2000): 1-20, esp. 12.

establishment of the Islamic Republic was the execution of the Jewish leader Habib Elghanayan, a «prominent industrialist, philanthropist and former head of the community»¹⁶. He was accused to be a spy for Israel and then killed on 9 May 1979.

This difficult situation forced many Jews, especially those who had explicitly supported the Pahlavi regime, to leave the country. In this regard, Menashri reports that «about two third of the community (including most of the religious and social leadership, the educated class, and many of the community's wealthy individuals) left the country»¹⁷. This phenomenon of emigration of the Jews continued for a few years after the revolution. Then it registered a setback for a relatively long period during the Iran-Iraq war when it was extremely difficult to leave the country. In that period, because of the severe restrictions on exit visas that were perpetrated by the government, many Jewish families tried to flee from the country illegally.

As for many Muslim compatriots, life in Iran was perceived as unsafe and dangerous. For the Jews this difficult situation was even more emphasized by a wave of anti-Jewish sentiment that seemed to emerge after the victory of the revolution. In this regard, as argued by Sanasarian, the Iranian Jews received «harsher treatment»¹⁸ than the other religious communities, who were free to live and practice in the country. Moreover, after the Revolution, the Iranian Jewish community remained without their «spiritual leader»¹⁹ Rabbi Yedidia Shofet²⁰, who left Iran in 1982. The demographic impact of this 1979 diaspora was stronger in a community, like the Jewish one, which had already started leaving Iran, albeit for economic reasons, during the Pahlavi regime.

After a difficult period of confiscation and execution, the Islamic Republic of Iran started modifying its strategy towards the Jews, in general respecting the religious liberty of the non-Muslim minorities of Iran. This new approach was functioned, once again, to the political action of Khomeini, who could find an ally for the consolidation of his personal power on the Jewish community that remained in Iran. Indeed, the intensity of religiosity of the Jews would have been a great support for the stability of the newly founded State, in a very harmonic and organic way. In one of his historical speeches, in February 1979, Khomeini made an important distinction (*tafāvot*) between the Iranian Jews and Zionists.²¹ The first ones, who were considered as the real followers of Judaism, were identified as integral part of the country. The others, on the contrary, were considered as imperialistic politicians and allies of the Western powers.

An editorial of May 1979, which appeared in the Iranian daily newspaper *Ettela'at*²², reported the proclamation of Khomeini acknowledging the deep roots of the Iranian Jewish community in Iran. For the first time he recognized the deep

¹⁶ Houman Sarshar, *Jewish Communities of Iran: Entries on Judeo-Persian Communities*, (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2011), 73.

¹⁷ David Menashri, *The Pahlavi Monarchy and the Islamic Revolution in Esther's Children; a Portrait of Iranian Jews*, ed. Houman Sarshar, (Beverly Hills, Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002), 381-402, esp. 196.

¹⁸ Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), 110.

¹⁹ David Menashri, *The Jews in Iran: Between the Shah and Khomeini*, in *Anti-Semitism in Times of Crisis*, ed. Sander Lawrence Gilman and Steven T. Katz, (New York University Press, 1991), 353-371, esp. 362.

²⁰ 7dorim/ Rabbi Yedidia Shofet: <https://www.7dorim.com/en/nobility/chacham-yedidia-shofet/> Accessed online in October 2021.

²¹ Delshad, *Case of Religiosity among*.

²² *Ettela'at* is a Persian-language newspaper published in Iran. It is among the oldest publications in the country and the oldest Persian newspaper in the world.

historical and religious bond of the Iranian Jewish community, which was defined as the heir to the great monotheistic religious tradition.²³

3.1.3 The new Iranian Constitution and the Jews

A specific approach to the religious minorities (*Aqaliyat*²⁴) of Iran, followed to these proclamations. For the first time, also the religious minorities could find an official recognition in the new Iranian Constitution (*Qānun-e Asāsi-e Jomhuri-e Eslāmi-e Irān*), which has been adopted by a referendum on 2 and 3 December 1979. Articles 13, 14 and 64, on the recognition of minorities, are of particular interest to our purposes.

Article 13 of 1979 (amended in 1989) acknowledges Zoroastrian, Jews, and Christians as the only recognized religious minorities in the country. It states: «Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities (*Aqaliyatha-ye rasmi*) who are free to practice their religious ceremonies within the limits of the law»²⁵. For that reason, as I will examine later in this chapter, they are legitimately allowed to elect their national legislators in the *Majles*, the Iranian Parliament. In this regard, one seat of the Parliament is reserved to the Jews, irrespectively of the real number of Iranian Jewish nationals.

This article sparked many debates in Academia. Indeed, it holds various limitations, which need to be addressed. The first issue is related to the fact that, according to Article 13, the Jews are banned from seeking high public office in the executive, presidential or legal branches of the government. The second aspect

²³ Editorial, *Hesab-e jame'eh-ye Yahud gheyr az jame'eh-ye sahyunist ast*, Ettela'at Tehran, 14 May, 1979.

²⁴ The use of term *aqaliyat* to refer to the Iranian religious communities of Iran is at the centre of various discussion both inside and outside the country. The debate on the concept of religious minority in Iran took place for the first time during the work of the Constituent Assembly following the Iranian Revolution. The use of the term and its meaning were disputed by all the members of the Assembly. Sunni members, for example, protested against the use of this terminology because they saw the term as a description of a constitutionally determined Shiite predominance. (See: Anja Pistor-Hatam, Non-understanding and Minority Formation in Iran, *Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 55, no. 1, (2017): 87-98, esp. 90). Also, the members of other religious communities were critical on this use: for the Armenians should be completely omitted in favour of '*Jame'eh*'. The Armenian representative in the Constituent Assembly said: The reason for my using of 'community' instead of 'minority' is that community indicates a particular social, national, religious, cultural and historical order or system (see: Pistor-Hatam, Non-understanding, 90). *Aqaliyat*, which became the official term designated to represent the non-Shiite religious communities of Iran, is defined as follows: *Aqaliyat* are all the religious minorities of Iran adhering to a divine religion (*din-e elahi*) that are less numerous than the believers of a numerically majority religion. (Pistor-Hatam, Non-understanding, 90). The criteria of distinction between majority and minority appear to be only quantitative. The term is used in the same sense in the pages of this work. For a complete discussion of the issue, see Pistor-Hatam, Non-understanding.

²⁵ Some scholars linked this prescription of article 13 to the definition of '*dhemmis*' (protected groups), which appeared also in medieval and pre-modern Iran. *Dhemmi* is a historical term that refers to the non-Muslims living in a Islamic state who have legal protection. The word literally means protected person, referring to the state's obligation under Sharia to protect the individual's life, property, freedom of religion, in exchange of loyalty to the state and the payment of the tax. In the contrary Furman argues that in the Iranian Constitution the term '*Aqaliyat*' seems to be linked just to the concept of minority in a quantitative sense. He underlines a big difference between the Iranian use of the term '*Aqaliyat*' and other concepts like '*ahl al dhimmi*' or '*mukhalifin al-din*' (the others in religion). For Furman these terms use a cultural and political criterion of division of the people, while the term *aqaliyat* is just quantitative. (Furman, Minorities, 2.)

concerns the important question of the Baha's, who are not mentioned in the article, and the debate under the *Ahl-e al Ketāb*. Indeed, the term *Aqaliyatha-ye rasmi* refers just to the Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians who are recognized as 'People of the Book'. Based on a tradition that relies on Qur'an and Sunna, they are the only minorities free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies in Iran. As *Ahl-e al Ketāb* they «have a special status because their religion is based on Divine Revelation and monotheistic faith»²⁶.

This underlines a further aspect on the debate, which is expressed by Chosky. He argues that «Iran's Constitution enshrines religion as a primary manner of difference within the country's population»²⁷. While Pisto-Hatam argues that «although the Islamic Republic acknowledges the existence of linguistic, ethnic and 'racial' differences, these are no criteria to divide population into minority and majority [...]. The only criteria for division are faith and the adherence to a religion, which is a fact of free will»²⁸.

Article 14 is based on the two principles of human rights (*hoquq-e bashar*) and equality (*barābarin*). The same principles can be found in the Quranic verses 60: 8-9 which specifies that Muslim and non-Muslim must live together peacefully:

Allah does not forbid you from dealing kindly and fairly with those who have neither fought nor driven you out of your homes. Surely Allah loves those who are fair. Allah only forbids you from befriending those who have fought you for 'your' faith, driven you out of your homes, or supported 'others' in doing so. And whoever takes them as friends, then it is they who are the 'true' wrongdoers.²⁹

According to Article 14, the Islamic Republic and the Iranian Muslims must treat the other religious minorities with respect and fairness, in accordance with Islamic justice. These principles are practiced just to these people who are not engaged in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran, demanding the loyalty of these minorities to the Islamic Republic. Chosky argues that this Article shows how the Constitution is founded on different treatments that are based on religious identity. He states: «the traditional principles of Medieval Muslim law and customary practice toward the *dhemmy* or protected communities have been reintroduced, albeit in modern constitutional and judicial terminology»³⁰.

Article 64 is one of the most significant articles of the new Constitution, because it seems to integrate the religious minorities not only in the cultural and national project of the Islamic Republic, but more specifically in its political asset. Indeed, this Article guarantees that five MPs elected in the Islamic Consultative Assembly are members of the recognized religious minorities. One of these seats is reserved to the Jewish community, even though this latter represents a mere 0,04 percent of the Iranian electorate³¹.

The new Constitution of the Islamic Republic had an important role in officially providing equality for all Iranian citizens before the law, something that

²⁶ Furman, *Minorities*, 3.

²⁷ Jamsheed K. Chosky, *Non-Muslim Religious Minorities in Contemporary Iran, Iran and the Caucasus* 16, no. 3 (2012): 271-299, esp. 275.

²⁸ Pistor-Hatam, *Non-understanding*, 90.

²⁹ From the translation provided by Mustafa Khattab, *The Clear Quran: A Thematic English*, (THE CLEAR QURAN® SERIES Translation, 2017).

³⁰ Chosky, *Non-Muslim Religious Minorities*, 288.

³¹ Sarshar, *Jewish communities*, 76.

is also specified by Article 3 (14). In reality, the penal code of the new State was at that time still based on a discriminatory approach against non-Muslim citizens in terms of penalty for adultery (Article 82.3 of the Iranian Penal Code) and reparation for a non-Muslim victim (Article 297). Under that article «reparation for a non-Muslim male victim who was a member of a religious minority was half of the compensation offered to the family of a Muslim male victim»³². These two articles have been modified by an important constitutional amendment, which was ratified by the sixth *Majles* (2000-2004). The Iranian government in that period was led by the reformist Mohammad Khatami, who, in different occasions, underlined the necessity of an equal approach towards Muslim and non-Muslim Iranians. In one famous speech he argued:

In our civil society, it is not only Muslims who have rights or are considered citizens. Respect for human rights is the basis of our culture [...] it is the natural consequence of our religious precepts and teachings. The commander of the faithful, Imam Ali, invited his followers to respect the principles of justice and equity towards Muslims and non-Muslims, saying that among men there are two groups: brothers in faith and similar in creation³³.

3.1.4 *The Jews and the Iran-Iraq war*

The third approach of the Islamic Republic toward the Jewish community consisted in a strengthening of the government's pro-Jewish strategy, that found its major moment during the so-called *Jangh-e Tahmili*, the Iran Iraq war. Indeed, the war against an external enemy, like Saddam Hussein at that time, was felt as a moment of reconciliation and dissipation of contrasts between the different communities of Iran. From that moment, as it happened during the 1979 Revolution, Muslim and Jews fought together for the salvation of the Iranian society and for common ideals, such as freedom, democracy, and nationalism. This time, they became also «brothers in arms»³⁴ for the salvation of the country. In this respect, Yousef refers: «When Iraq attacked Iran, all Iranians were together to defend our country»³⁵.

In this regard, the Jewish community too felt the necessity of participating in the war in order to defend what was unanimously perceived as the «sacred soil, our one and only motherland»³⁶. The Jewish community of Iran was invited to sacrifice for the need of the country also through the words of the newspaper *Tamuz*. The newspaper once again functioned as an aggregator of the Iranian community as a whole and as a mediator between the new government and the Jewish people. In several articles *Tamuz* called on the young Jews to help in the new struggle. It wrote:

Jewish Iranian youth, before and after 22 Bahman 1357, joined their compatriots in the struggle against the Sha's regime, and in this way sacrificed members for the Revolution. After the victory of the Islamic Republic, and the stabilizing of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Jewish youth has to go again to

³² Sarshar, *Jewish communities*, 75.

³³ From my translation of Riccardo Cristiano, *Tra lo Scià e Khomeini. 'Ali Shari'ati: un'utopia soppressa*, (Roma: Jouvence, 2006), 25. See also: muslimmedia.com/arhives – accessed online in October 2021.

³⁴ This expression is used by Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 118-

³⁵ Personal interview with Yousef, November 2019.

³⁶ Interview with Yousef, November 2019.

the field and participate with its Muslim brothers and sisters to the holy war against Iraq³⁷.

Tamuz was able to gather the support of many Jews, also for its ability to elevate the Jewish holidays, such as Passover, first in a revolutionary and then nationalistic context. Everything got a connotation of a 'revolution', namely a fight against the common enemies. The aim of Tamuz, while calling on the Jewish youth for the war, was «to create content that would unite the different Jewish communities in Iran and generate a base for dialogue with the nascent Islamic Iranian identity»³⁸.

The war and the strong impact of the war (to the economic and social situation of the country) had a unifying effect for the people of Iran. The Jews, together with the other religious and ethnic Iranian communities felt, maybe more than ever, to belong to a country of which salvation had to be achieved by a common effort. The Jews's sacrifice in the war gained a public gratitude with the recognition of the Jews who were murdered as *shāhid*, martyrs. In this regard, a mural at the intersection of Vali Asr Avenue and Mirdamad Street in Tehran was painted. The mural, which is located in one of the most important and crowded traffic arteries of the capital, depicts the faces of five Jewish martyrs. Their images are surmounted by the iconic figure of Khomeini.

The 1979 Revolution and the war against Iraq had a strong impact on the life of the Jews of Iran, especially for those who decided to stay in their homeland. This impact, as I will examine later on this chapter, was stronger in the big urban centres and especially in the capital, Tehran. As specified by Haroun Yeshayai:

The Jewish community is now in possession of more than eleven active synagogues in Tehran and many of these religious buildings have got Hebrew schools both for boys and girls. We owned two kosher restaurants, three concert halls, a Jewish hospital, a Jewish cemetery and even a Jewish sanatorium for older or retired people. Furthermore, there is a library of more than 25.000 titles³⁹.

In May 2002, the Iranian Media Broadcasting, in cooperation with the Jewish community of Tehran, established a daily radio programme of thirty minutes in Hebrew. The programme, which was called '*Sedā-ye David*' – The voice of David, also contributed to the free circulation of Iranian news outside Iran.

3.2 Construction and deconstruction of an identity in post-revolutionary Iran: the Jews after the 1979 Revolution.

*Love of the homeland is an article of faith*⁴⁰

The question of the Iranian identity, which was discussed extensively in previous chapters, has returned to great relevance even after that the Islamic Republic of Iran

³⁷ Editorial, *Nasl-e javan-e kalimi-ye Iran bidar shodeh ast*, Tamuz (Tehran), May 6, 1982, 3.

³⁸ Sternfeld, *The Revolution's Forgotten Sons and Daughters*, 4.

³⁹ Interview of Haroun Yeshayai, who at the time was the chief of the Jewish community of Tehran, reported by Delshad, *Case of Religiosity*, 68.

⁴⁰ Quoted from Benjamin Flöhr, *Love of one's homeland is part of faith – Islam and Nationalism in Ahmet Hamdi Akseki's 'catechism' for the military*, ed. Lutz Berger, Tamer Düzyol, *Kemalism as a Fixed Variable in the Republic of Turkey*, (Bibliotheca Academica, 2019): 45 – 74.

came to power. In fact, the new state, in addition to a new political order, has also brought a new set of values through which to interpret some aspects of the society. The formation of the identity is, indeed, a long and dynamic process which is often also linked to the political and social context. In this regard, as it happened already with the rise to the power of the two Pahlavi, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the concept of national identity has changed again. The appropriation of a new set of values, which was functioning in the formation of a new identity concept, was necessary in order to find a new way to integrate citizens in the new Iranian society. The primary tool used to achieve this integration was religion and the sharing of common religious values. This was accomplished through two different approaches. The first one was the idea of an international identity, which was tied to the 'nation of Islam' (the so-called religious nationalism), which gave the State the chance to overcome the territorial borders of Iran and to spread its ideology in other countries. The second one, which corresponded to a new vision of the Iranian national identity concept, which was emphasized by the historical vicissitudes, was a religious-Iranian national identity⁴¹. For what concerns this second aspect, the strategy of the Islamic Republic, while underlining the importance of religion as a primary source of identity, has not stopped emphasizing the importance of the land⁴² and of belonging to Iranian soil, which has once again become a strong element of identity. The foundations of this rhetoric can be traced back to the revolutionary ideologist Ali Shariati, who stated, on several occasions, that the notion of Iranian identity was derived from two elements of equal importance: the first one is religion, which Shariati defined as the «eternal and immortal reference where the life is originated»⁴³ and *Iranianess*.

The exaltation of the Iranian component in the construction of the new Iranian identity (which had its roots in the historical memory of the country) was also the result of the tendency to exalt localism. This goal, while countering the emergence of the culture of globalization, was pursued in order to preserve the local heritage and the national culture. This cultural openness, which was combined with an effective religious rhetoric, would be the main element of the new Iranian identity that would be decisive, as we will analyse subsequently, in the inclusion of the Jewish community. This attitude, which was also implemented for the purpose of adding legitimacy to the new state, demarcated the unique character of the Iranian experience as relating to a distinct and autonomous territorial entity with an indisputable identity culture. Religion, in this context, became the mean through which catch the favour of the people, looking again at the historical roots of Iran, where religion (intended in its general sense) was an important element of the Iranian culture.

As stated, the victory of the revolution also inaugurated a new course in the debate on Iranian identity, which was connected not only to a deep religious sentiment, but also to a practice of myths and traditions of the past. In this conception, the Jews of Iran could find an expression of their multiple and dynamic identity. In this regard, the newly formed Islamic Republic could not completely discard the idea of nationalism, but it had to reinterpret historical memory according

⁴¹ Ahmad Ashraf, The crisis of national and ethnic identities in contemporary Iran, in *Iranian studies*, Vol. 26 n. 1/2 (Winter/Spring 1993), 159-164, esp. 162.

⁴² The use of the term land in this work refers to the sense of belonging and the historical connection the Jews share with the Iranian soil. The land Iran, in this regard is perceived as the foundation of the national community and a powerful cultural resource capable of nourishing a sense of unity.

⁴³ Cristiano, *Tra lo Scìa e Khomeini*, 19.

to its understanding, albeit no longer secular, of Iranian identity identity. For the Islamic Republic, referring to the ancient Persian identity was, once again, a way to find legitimacy over the Iranian people.⁴⁴ In this regard, in 1992, the «modernist pragmatist»⁴⁵ president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, especially in order to appeal to young people, «conveyed secular nationalist messages by invoking Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*»⁴⁶. In September 2010, the President Ahmadinejad proudly attended the unveiling in Tehran of the Cyrus Cylinder⁴⁷ (which was on loan from the British Museum) and described Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire, as the 'King of the World'⁴⁸.

Against the background of these first considerations, we can easily understand that this newly proposed notion of national identity is faithful to the idea of a nationalism that incorporates diversity into the construction of an Iran that is built on differences. In this respect, it is interesting to underline the words of Ayatollāh Khomeini who, during his speeches, used to refer to all Iranians with this formula 'greetings to the people of Iran'. The use of the sentence 'people of Iran' is symptomatic of the approach of the newly State towards all Iranians, who were perceived, at least publicly, as a community, even though diverse in its ethnic and religious sense. The strategy of incorporation of diversity was first of all based on respect for the religious freedom of non-Muslim minorities, including the Jewish one. Khomeini, in this regard, used to refer to minorities as 'Iranian brothers' and part of the Iranian nation, '*ahl-e yek mellat*'⁴⁹. In this context, the process of national unity promoted by Ayatollāh Khomeini was aimed at integrating the Jewish minority into the reconstruction of the national identity, emphasizing values that would no longer be interpreted merely as Muslim but as religious principles.⁵⁰

This new attitude has favoured a general relaxation of relations between the Muslim majority and minorities. Moreover, I have examined a flowering of a new revival of Jewish culture: the Jewish community could find in the religion an element of social cohesion and belonging to the nation.

The assimilation into the new Iranian social reality was further favoured by what Delshad defines as «new religiosity»⁵¹. Indeed, the Jews have demonstrated a strong adaptation to the Islamic Republic and have gradually reached a *modus vivendi*, which is a form of an endurable kind of coexistence among the Muslim dominance, thanks to hanging on their religious orthodoxy⁵². In this regard, the relationship with the Muslim majority has been strengthened.

As stated by Rahimiyan «the prevailing narrative regarding Iranian Jewry, the Israeli and Western one, has a tendency to conceive of Iranian Jews as living under a tyrannical regime that makes their lives so miserable that they are forced to seek refuge abroad». Actually, as argued by Rahimiyan, «the relationship between Iran's

⁴⁴ Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of*, 212.

⁴⁵ Sima Shakhshari, *Politics of Rightful Killing. Civil Society, Gender, and Sexuality in Weblogistan*, (Duke University Press: 2020), 72.

⁴⁶ Cristiano, *Tra lo Scia e Khomeini*, 19.

⁴⁷ The Cyrus Cylinder is a Babylonian account of the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 BC. is an ancient symbol of Persian tolerance.

⁴⁸ This expression, which is reported in the Cyrus Cylinder, has been used by Nabonidus, the last King of Babylon (555-539 BC), who declared Cyrus 'King of the world'.

⁴⁹ See: Pistor-Hatam, *Non-understanding*, 91.

⁵⁰ Delshad, *Case of Religiosity*, 75.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² Ivi, 71.

Jews and its government and culture constitutes a dialectic far more complex»⁵³. Indeed, it is the result of various historical vicissitudes that led the Jews to adapt to the newly formed State and to find a way to make this relationship possible.

The form of attitude to change of the Jewish community in the country was expressed through a process of new assimilation of Judaism, which was favoured by various contingent factors. Among those, the need to compensate for the decimation of the Jewish population in Iran stands out. This approach was necessary, especially after the great Iranian diaspora of 1979, which led many Jews to leave Iran. In this context, the now small Iranian Jewish community had to guarantee the internal security and the salvation of its members.

After the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian Jews were also able to identify themselves as one religious' group with all the other Iranians, sharing the same religious principles with the other communities of the Iranian soil. In this respect, Delshad argues that the Islamic Republic appeared to be in some ways «the preferable authority for the orthodox Jewish community of Iran. Indeed, the religiously based fundamentals and Marxism of the Islamic Republic created harmony and compatibility between the Jews and the Muslims»⁵⁴.

The rise of the Islamic Republic and its historical path reflect the transformation of the religious daily life of the Iranian Jews, who were able to adapt to change without undergoing it, re-establishing a deep bond with their ancient religion. Furthermore, the Jewish-Iranian community shared the same conservatism and orthodoxy and the same totalitarian approach to religiosity with Khomeini's Islam.

In fact, in post-revolutionary Iran, Judaism has become, for Iranian Jews, an element of strong cohesion: especially in the face of the crushing of the traditional national belonging following the tension caused by the political instability of the twentieth century, this functions to recompose and redesign their identity. After the revolution, we witness a reawakening of the Jewish religious identity: the renewed valuing of religion in the public sphere has become a key element of Jewish daily life and has contributed to the survival of old Iranian Jewish traditions and their continued perpetuation to this day.⁵⁵ As Delshad argues, the Islamic Republic has created harmony and compatibility between Jews and Muslims. They have always shared a connected identity based on the same genuine values and Persian roots, but right after the Islamic Revolution they also became part of one religious corpus, sharing the same religious principles. For instance, I have started analysing how Jewish cultural creativity, secular and religious, has been largely articulated according to the Persian lifestyle and the ways in which the national culture has helped shape the religious one. Religion has become an element of intensification of the common sense of belonging that the Iranian people share besides the spatial sense of place.

The rhetoric of a common sense of belonging and territorialisation, powered by an effective religious zeal, also found full expression during the war against Iraq

⁵³ Orly R. Rahimiyan, "My Homeland, My Diaspora: Iranian Jewish Identity in Modern Times", *Journal of Hate Studies* 8 no.1 (2010): 53–86.

⁵⁴ Delshad, *Case of Religiosity*, 72.

⁵⁵ From my empirical research and interviews (conducted in Iran in 2019) I have identified a new approach to religion after the 1979 revolution. While in the period of secularization, the Jews, especially in Tehran, did not frequent the synagogues, after the revolution the major synagogues of the capital have recorded a significant increase in the number of worshippers. Delshad (*Case of Religiosity*, 71) states: The number of attendees of synagogues in big, urbanized cities in Iran shows a considerable reduction during the 60s and 70s in comparison to the previous decades.

(1980–1988), in which the sense of belonging to the land became a need to defend the ‘sacred’ territory. In this context, the common battle against the Iraqi invader has been attributed with a profound meaning, even a religious one. For Shia Muslims, this struggle was compared to Karbala, while for the Jews the values of freedom and justice were expressed religiously at Passover, which commemorates the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt and their journey to the Promised Land. The use of religious concepts, which started from the need for defence, had already been used during the revolution: in April 1979, the Iranian TV hosted a program on the Passover to show how Jews could be included in the revolutionary rhetoric.

The use of these myths (both examples of justice against an invader) was justified by the necessity of a big campaign of mobilization of the citizens. Indeed, as argued by Naghmeh Sohrabi «The postrevolutionary state in Iran has engaged in an extensive project of memory making through public commemorations and the production of written documents and oral histories».⁵⁶ In this regards, the paradigms of Karbala and Passover, both infused with a prominent sacrificial dimension, both came to reflect resistance and the salvation of the community. Furthermore, they introduced two important ethical dimensions in the Iranian context: first of all, a broad culture of martyrdom (*shahādat*) and the duty to oppose tyrants and injustice, not for personal interest but for the good of the community. The value of sacrifice and martyrdom have been able to create shared consciousness and feelings of mutual dependence and exclusivity, which, as Smith argues, are able to strengthen the culture, memories, and shared myths of a nation.⁵⁷

3.3 Oudlajān today

The sense of attachment that linked the Jews of Tehran to their old neighbourhood is still strong nowadays even though the Jewish community lives in the north of Tehran since decades and Oudlajān has changed its connotation. Indeed, since the time of the last Pahlavi the quarter was inhabited mostly by immigrant families of non-Jewish heritage. Moreover, after the 1979 Revolution, Iran has known a fast growth in terms of inhabitants and Tehran has become a megalopolis. In this regard, the old part of the town became the southern suburb of the city, a place of mostly poverty and marginalization.

3.3.1 *The marginalization of Oudlajān*

Today the city of Tehran shows up as split in an old southern part, including the remains of old Oudlajān and the *bazaar*, and a modern northern part with skyscrapers, restaurants, and big shopping malls.

Actually, the South of Tehran is an extremely poor area that suffers from a great social and economic marginality, despite being the area where the great *bazaar* of Tehran is located. The gap between the North and the South of the capital has grown again in recent decades. This gap increases the differentiation of these parts of Tehran from an economic and social point of view, something that has been already dominant in the past, especially during the urban expansion of the capital under the Pahlavi. Indeed, in that period, the capital started registering a deep economic prosperity and an increase in population.

⁵⁶ Naghmeh Sohrabi, “Muddling Through”.

⁵⁷ Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism*, p. 28.

The marginalization of the South of the capital (including Oudlajān) is also due to the fact that, since the time of Mohammad Reza Shah, this area was one of those with the highest rate of population growth. Thousands of new migrants, especially poor people coming from rural areas, started replacing the population that originally inhabited the historical part of Tehran. Oudlajān, which originally represented the core of old Tehran, was completely abandoned by its Jewish inhabitants, and «converted as settlements of immigrants and low-income groups»⁵⁸.

Haroun Yashayaei in his book writes:

Today the buildings in Oudlajān are old and they are all crumbling, with scraped walls (*divār hā-ye frsudeh*) and in which the disgusting smell of poverty is perceived (*buy-e nfrtāngiz fqr*).⁵⁹

Mohsen reports:

Look at this neighbourhood today: our older homes are sold, the *Kucheh-ye Haft Kenise* has not sign of our passage anymore. My home on that street was completely destroyed in the late fifties and it does not exist anymore. Also my second home, in *Kucheh-ye Darakhte* is gone. All the shops today have Muslim owners. It's a new neighbourhood⁶⁰.

Nowadays, the Oudlajān quarter is still an isolated area of the town, without infrastructure and basic services. It is, in general, a ruined, poor, and degraded neighbourhood that is strongly affected by the spatial segregation to which the whole south of Tehran is forced. For this reason, in recent decades, it has lost the majority of its inhabitants. This means that seventy-nine percent of the residents of Oudlajān are today immigrants' groups that were not born in Tehran.⁶¹

Figure9: Demographic changes in Oudlajān. (Sources: Ettehadiieh & Zamani Nia, 1998; National Census from 1996 to 2006).

Persian year	1247	1262	1301	1311	1359	1375	1385
Western calendar	1868	1883	1922	1932	1980	1996	2006
Population	136495	16490	33418	37000	41978	23828	21254

As seen in figure9, since the abandonment of Oudlajān by the Jews in the 1950s, the neighbourhood registered an unprecedented physical and moral decline that has reached its peak in the past decades.

Yousef, looking with melancony to the quarter, argues:

You see now that the neighborhood is no longer suitable for living. They have just asphalted.⁶²

⁵⁸ Hanachee & Rezaei, *Living in a Historical*, 27.

⁵⁹ Haroun Yashayaei, *Ruzi che esm-e khod rā dānestam*, (Tehran: Shahab Sagheb, 2017), 13.

⁶⁰ Personal online interview with Mohsen, December 2020.

⁶¹ Hanachee & Rezaei, *Living in a Historical*, 27.

⁶² Personal interview, Tehran, November 2019.

The abandonment and conversion of Oudlajān into a neighbourhood of immigrants has strongly damaged its historicity and its communitarian value, as a space of interaction and union of its Jewish community. Indeed, the areas of the neighbourhood that best represented the community in the past were destroyed by neglect.

In general, the space of the quarter, was also standardized from a qualitative point of view, without considering the main characteristics of the old quarter. This is the reason why Oudlajān today has an unidentified appearance, with anonymous constructions. This is the result of the phenomena of the overpopulation that led to the destruction of the main ancient houses.

The spatial organization of the new inhabitants, the disinterest of the municipality and of the *Anjoman-e Kalimiān-e Tehrān*, Tehran Jewish Committee (which, as we will see, has only recently realized the need to rebuild the neighbourhood) and the construction of new quarters in the North of Tehran have led to the formation of an anonymous and alienating environment in Oudlajān. As reported in the work of Hussein, «the expansion of cities—as a result of increasing populations—requires rapid physical changes that destroy familiar urban features and elements, creating unfamiliar environments and causing gentrification and the destruction of memory and place identity»⁶³.

Actually, as specified by Mills, the deterioration of the quarter in all aspects has inevitably undermined «cultural convergence, loss of identity and originality, diminution of common social memories and the sense of attachment»⁶⁴, damaging the neighbourhood in a variety of ways.

Nevertheless, it is exactly in this period of alienation that Oudlajān started entering the memory of many Jews, providing «the stage for nostalgic memory»⁶⁵. Indeed, this situation of deep deterioration of the quarter led many former inhabitants to understand the necessity of re-appropriation of a place that once was their home. It is important to reiterate that Oudlajān had always had its own distinctive identity and familiar nature, and therefore this had helped the formation of common memories and symbols that the former inhabitants are trying to reconstruct and rediscover.

Figure10: Changes in Oudlajan from its development to the present date. (Source: Mohaddese Ghadiri and Mozaffar Sarrafi 2022)⁶⁶

⁶³ Fatmaelzahraa Hussein, John Stephens, and Reena Tiwari, Cultural Memories and Sense of Place in Historic Urban Landscapes: The Case of Masrah Al Salam, the Demolished Theatre Context in Alexandria, Egypt, *Land* 9, no. 8 (2020): 264-279, esp. 264.

⁶⁴ Shiva Hakimian, Ali Afshar, and Joanna Kowalczyk-Anioł, Returning Life to the Center of Tehran: The Oudlajan Foodscape, *Turyzm/Tourism* 29, no. 2, (2019): 31-41, esp. 33.

⁶⁵ Mills, *Streets of Memory*, 60.

⁶⁶ Mohaddese Ghadiri and Mozaffar Sarrafi, “Integrating support groups, an effective approach to regenerate historic neighborhoods of Iran Case study: Oudlajan Neighborhood, Tehran”, *Land Use Policy* no. 112 (January 2022), 1-11, esp. 4.

Aspect	1553-1860s Hesar-e Tahmasbi (Tahmasbi fortification) - to the beginning of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar sultanate	1870s-1925 Nasiri dynasty	Pahlavi dynasty		1980 – 1987 Iran Iraq war	1987-1997	1997-2005	2005- Present
Social	The gentrying trend of <i>Oudlajan</i> . A population composed of diverse ethnic populations, including Armenians, Jewish and Muslim Iranians, Rey Immigrants, noblemen, and military families.	Population changes begin. The ongoing presence of wealthy Jewish merchants and families; the arrival of Armenian immigrants; initial migration trend of wealthy residents into northern areas of Tehran after constructing Nasiri fortification ⁵ . Overall, the number of tenants increases ⁶ .	The migration of wealthy residents to northern areas of Tehran continues.	The migration of Jewish residents to northern areas of Tehran begins.	The migration of long-time wealthier residents to other parts of Tehran continues. Immigration of lower classes into the area increases. Neighborhood safety begins to be a concern.	The migration of long-time residents to other parts of Tehran continues. Increase in the population struggling with addiction and engaging in criminal behavior living in abandoned buildings. Increased crime rate and safety concerns.	The peak point of migration of long-time residents and arrival of poor immigrants from far reaches of Iran and Afghanistan. Increase in people with addiction problems in the neighborhood. Increase in crime. Change in sex ratio with men becoming dominant residents.	A very limited number of long-time residents in the neighborhood. Increased population containing child laborers without birth certificates, addicts, and poor job-seeking migrants in the neighborhood. The continued trend in male to female population ratio.
Economic	Increasing economic prosperity; development of specialty crafts such as goldsmiths and winemakers. Diverse employment opportunities with the largest number of shops in Tehran.	Construction of Nasiri fortification begins to negatively impact job opportunities. <i>Oudlajan</i> and Pamenar small bazaars adequately meet the daily needs of locals.	<i>Oudlajan</i> and Pamenar small bazaars remain adequate in terms of meeting the daily needs of locals.	<i>Oudlajan</i> and Pamenar small bazaar remain adequate in terms of meeting the daily needs of locals.	Illegal economic activity growing through the rise of converted buildings. The scale of Pamenar small bazaar transitions from local to city-wide.	Reduction in the number of commercial activities. Increase in the number of illegal warehouses and bag-production workshops.	Lack of facilities and services. Reduction in the number of commercial activities. Increase in the number of illegal warehouses and bag-production workshops.	Changes in the activities of <i>Oudlajan</i> small bazaar from metal-related activities into handicrafts, of which most close within one year due to lack of demand. Blackmarket economy grows, consisting of drug and illegal medicine trade.
Laws and Regulations				Bataadieh Law introduced.			The development of a neighborhood regeneration initiative.	The rehabilitation and revival of <i>Oudlajan</i> small bazaar.
Public and Governmental-Sector Decisions	Establishment of Tahmasbi fortification (the neighborhood was located in its inner areas); the existence of two gateways between neighborhood borders.	Demolishing Darvazeh Dulab and Darvazeh Shemiran gateways to build Nasiri fortification.	Building new streets and widening existing ones. Nasiri fortification was destroyed to expand Tehran.	Building new streets and widening existing ones.	Prioritization of the war over historic neighborhoods living conditions and social concerns.	Parts of the neighborhood are purchased by the municipality and governmental organizations to rehabilitate <i>Oudlajan</i> .	Developing and implementing the "Organizing <i>Oudlajan</i> neighborhood" project. Registering <i>Oudlajan</i> neighborhood as a cultural heritage site and identifying <i>Oudlajan</i> as one of Tehran's tourist attractions. Establishment of different local institutions and NGOs in the neighborhood in response to problems.	Developing the "Design and landscape" plan of <i>Oudlajan</i> neighborhood, making an agreement on the renovation of the <i>Oudlajan</i> small bazaar and change in its activity, turning some houses in <i>Oudlajan</i> into public accommodation, and developing the neighborhood regeneration initiative.
Physical	The neighborhood contains the largest number of houses compared with others in Tehran.	The neighborhood area and the number of houses are reduced, as is the proportion of <i>Oudlajan</i> houses compared with other neighborhoods in Tehran.	<i>Oudlajan</i> divided into two separate parts by building Siros Street (Mostafa Khomeini), widening Nasereh street (Naser Khosrow), excluding a part of the neighborhood by building Bouzarjomhoori street (Panj-dah-e Khorad). Pamenar small bazaar loses its liveliness.	Widening Pamenar Street, destroying half of Hazrat-e Khadjeh Mosque ⁷ and dividing the neighborhood into three parts: Western, Mid, and Eastern. The exclusion of the eastern area of <i>Oudlajan</i> as a result of building Siros street.	A decrease in the number of residential buildings and an increase in obsolete and unused ones. Parts of residential buildings are converted into illegal warehouses and workshops.	An increase in environmental pollution; Substandard level of quality of life; A significant decrease in residential buildings. Majority of commercial activity on main streets only.	Implementing physical action plans such as street pavement; Renovation of the stores of <i>Oudlajan</i> small bazaar; Repairing some of the buildings in the neighborhood, and converting them into museums.	
Significant Events and Neighborhood Trends	People with different religions live in the neighborhood.	A lack of services and facilities for residents starts to emerge as a problem.	Modernization begins.	The government develops its first Comprehensive Plan for Tehran (1967).	Developing and implementing government plans. Intensifying complexity of neighborhood issues.	Developing and implementing various government plans. Unsuccessful attempts for improving the conditions of the neighborhood. The establishment of local institutions and NGOs.	Implementing physical action plans to improve the condition of the neighborhood by Urban Regeneration Corporation of Iran or Tehran municipality.	

3.4 Oudlajān: a place of belongingness

When I arrived to Oudlajān during my second visit to the quarter in 2019, it was a cold Saturday of November. That day, it was snowing and shortly after, the snow would have covered all of Tehran. The weather was the main subject of all conversations that day, also at the Mollah Hanina synagogue, the first stop of my fieldwork.

The atmosphere, besides the weather, was incredibly warm and friendly. Everyone wanted to talk about Oudlajān with me: the quarter, as I realized later during a friendly breakfast at the Ezra Yaghoub synagogue, is still one of the main pillars of the Iranian Jewish identity today within the small community of Tehrani Jews.

Even though the Jewish community of Tehran does not live in Oudlajān anymore, the quarter is still a fundamental part of the community's heritage. Oudlajān still represents, for many Jews, the source of their Iranian identity, as the place where their roots originated. For that reason, as specified by my interviewees, it is important to trace an objective image of Oudlajān today, since it still holds memories and stories of unity among the Iranian Jews of Tehran. The quarter, which is now in ruins, can still tell the story of the community that is covered in the dust of the neighbourhood.

Reconstructing the history of Oudlajān and telling the life of its inhabitants was not a difficult task also because, despite the destruction of a large part of the neighbourhood, the soul of the old quarter has been maintained. Moreover, in Tehran Oudlajān is the only quarter that has preserved, even though partially, its old traditional structure and urban appearance;⁶⁷ for that reason, it was easy for me to retrace the story of the community. Shamsi reports:

Many people say that the quarter has nothing of the old Oudlajān, just because none of us live here today. But look at these streets, they are our old streets. I can perfectly remember walking and playing here. The quarter is still animated by sellers, even though the majority of them are Muslims now.

Walking in the little narrow streets of the quarter during my fieldwork I could perfectly imagine the life of my interviewees in Oudlajān. Their memories fitted with the appearance of the quarter today. In particular, that snowy day of November, I remembered the words of the '7dorim' website that described the quarter as follows: «In this neighbourhood, with the first seasonal rainfall, the ground floor of the alleys became swamped, and swimmers muddy every step of the way as they stepped out of shoes».⁶⁸ When I showed this sentence to one of my interviewees, she replied:

As you can see, nothing has changed here, especially the atmosphere. That's why I still come here when I want to look at my past and to review my family.

⁶⁷ Susan Habib, Navid Jamali, Shaghayegh Shahhossein, Please Save Oudlajan as a Museum Without Walls, ed. Riva Raffaella, *Ecomuseums and cultural landscapes. State of the art and future prospects*, (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli Editore, 2017), 106-115, esp. 107.

⁶⁸ "Mahalleh-ye Oudlajān", 7dorim.com. (Accessed on 3 December 2021). Available at: https://www.7dorim.com/tasavir/mahale_odlajan/

3.4.1 The old places of Oudlajān: sites of remembering

Today Oudlajān shows a decidedly abandoned face, although many traces of the past can still be seen, such as old synagogues and bath houses. Moreover, sections of its ancient walls and old houses are still visible.

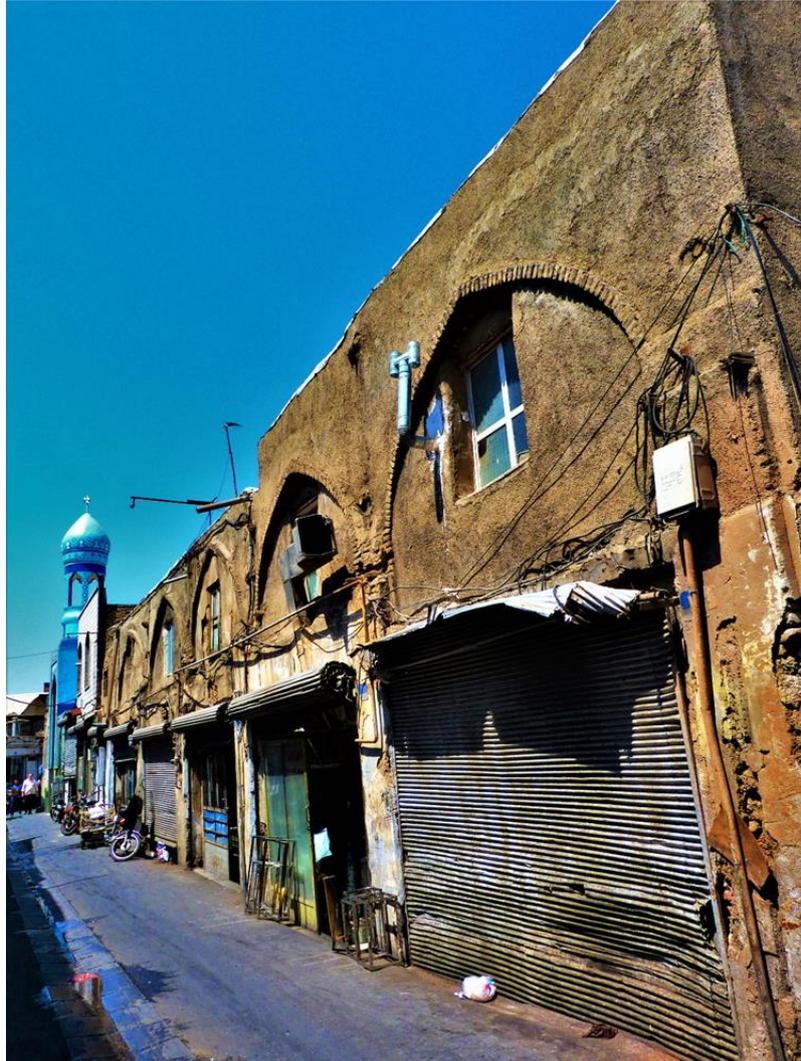
Thanks to the presence of different historical buildings, it is still possible to trace the signs of the past of Oudlajān and of that story that was told to me with so much emphasis and emotion.

When I visited the neighbourhood for the second time, I was welcomed by a local young man who showed me how, looking closely, Oudlajān was still steeped in their history. The maze of streets is still firmly standing, and several historic buildings can still be distinguished among the ruins of the houses. These streets and these buildings still have the ability of narrating the history of the community and for that reason they need to be preserved.

Figure11: Remains of the old Oudlajān. Personal picture, Tehran, August 2019.



Figure12: The streets of Oudlajān. Personal picture, November 2019.



They are «*lieux de memoire*»⁶⁹ where, as specified by Nora, «memory crystallizes and secretes itself». The places of the old quarter became *lieux de memoire* for the community at a time just as Oudlajān has been abandoned and a break with the past was constructed. As specified by Nora this break up with the past «is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn-but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de memoire*, real environments of memory»⁷⁰. Morley and Robins reiterate the fact that, in general, modern societies have lost contact with the past and, for that reason, the *lieux de memoire* have a fundamental role. They wrote: «With our lack of memory, we have to be content with *lieux de memoire*, places which remind

⁶⁹ According to Andrzej Szpociński *lieux de memoire* should be translated rather into ‘sites of remembering’ or ‘sites of memories’, or perhaps better yet as ‘sites where one remembers’, and not as ‘places of memory’. See: Andrzej Szpociński, Sites and Non-Sites of Memory, *Teksty Drugie* - Special Issue – English Edition, no. 1, (2016): 245-254, esp. 246.

⁷⁰ Pierre Nora, Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire, *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24, esp. 7.

us of the past, of a (broken) memory»⁷¹.

The memory of certain places has then a fundamental role also for the former inhabitants of Oudlajān, since these places «represent the enduring physical places where the past is remembered, commemorated, and constructed in the present day»⁷². For the former dwellers of the quarter it is important to remember, in order not to completely lose the link with Oudlajān that today has lost its identity as an autonomous entity.

Søren Kolstrup argues that sites of memory are «crossroads, [...] points where space and time meet memory»⁷³. In this regard, the words of Dorit have a great value: «When I return to Oudlajān it seems to go back in time.⁷⁴».

Among the symbolic places of the old quarter there are still the two ancient synagogues of Ezra Yaghoub and Mollah Hanina. These are the only two synagogues still in operation in the quarter, but they are still places of strong religiosity and offer a fascinating glimpse of modern Tehran life in one of the oldest neighbourhoods of the capital. The synagogues in greater Tehran are functional places which have still a vital role in the life of the community and their role is both political and social. While the two synagogues in Oudlajān have more a sentimental value for the community. These synagogues are part of people's personal stories; for example, as specified by my interviewees, for many former inhabitants Ezra Yaghoub has a deep value since it is the place where they had their *bar mitzvah*.

Another important site of remembering is the *Bimarestan-e Sapir* (that I had the chance to visit in November 2019), which is still the only hospital in the area. After the Revolution of 1979 the hospital, originally called Kheirkhah Clinic and then Cyrus the Great Hospital, was renamed in honour of the Jewish doctor Ruhollah Sapir. Before dying of typhus in Oudlajān in 1943, he had expressed the desire that the Kheirkhah Clinic would not fall apart. The Tehran Jewish Committee, which is still the owner of the hospital and provide financial support to all the services, makes sure that this desire does not vanish. The biggest difference with the former hospital is that patients are now only Muslims. Moreover, the environment and the atmosphere all around the area of the hospital have changed. One of the most tangible differences is the presence, just across the street, of the Imam Reza Seminary School, one of the oldest Shiite seminaries in Teheran. The chants that come out of the building and the presence of young seminar students all around, remark the fact that Oudlajān is no longer a Jewish quarter. The hospital is still a charity centre, the largest among the religious minorities in all Iran. As it was in the past, it is still open to any in need of specific medical treatments. The sign at the entrance says in Hebrew and Persian that the guest is welcomed. They use the biblical verse «You must love others as yourself» (Matthew 22:39).

⁷¹ David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 87.

⁷² Keir Reeves, Sites of memory, in *The Past in the Present: History, Memory and Public Life Sutcliffe*, ed., Anna Maerker, Simon Sleight, Adam Sutcliffe, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017): 65-79, esp. 65.

⁷³ Søren Kolstrup, Wings of Desire: Space, Memory and Identity, *O.V.A. Danish Journal of Film Studies*, no. 8 (1999): 115–124, esp. 115.

⁷⁴ Personal interview, Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

Figure13: The façade of the Sapir Hospital. Personal picture, August 2019.



While walking in the street of the quarter, the young guide who was with me was happy to show me two other important historical places of Oudlajān that reminded of the Jewish presence in the quarter. The first one was the old *hammām-e keshavarie*. From the exterior it has the appearance of a slightly crumbling construction, and it is difficult to imagine all the stories that took place in this building. Only the old sign reminds of its great past.

Among the old buildings of Oudlajān, the orphanage of the Jewish Women Organization of Iran is certainly one of the most evocative. Nowadays it is completely in ruins.

Figure14: The façade of the old orphanage of the Jewish Women Organization of Iran. Personal picture, November 2019.



The square, the street, the market, the synagogues represent today concrete realities of what the daily life of the inhabitants of Oudlajān was in the past. These places represent the true meanings of the life of the old inhabitants of Oudlajān as they are able to create an ‘*imago mundi*’, or a microcosm that concretizes their reality and expresses their being and essence.⁷⁵

3.4.2 *The material cultur and the question of identity*

The relationship between the former inhabitants and the old neighbourhood still develops through an indissoluble bond, which is built through life stories and family memories

This strong sentiment of connection between the two complementary identities of the Jews of Iran, of which we have extensively talked in the last chapters, is still today widely recognizable in the material culture of the community and in its daily and religious practices. When I went to Oudlajān for my field research in November 2019, the celebrations for the *jashn-e sāiebān-hā*, Sukkot⁷⁶, had just ended. The two synagogues that I visited were still adorned with the main decorations accompanying the feast. The first one that I visited is the Molla Hanina synagogue.⁷⁷ The main feature of this building is the presence, at the entrance, of a small courtyard, which forms a boundary between the street (Cyrus Street, just in the heart of Oudlajān) and the place of worship. The ceiling of the courtyard was decorated with different plants. A woman explained to me that four different species of plants are usually used to celebrate the festival of Sukkot: *tarnaj* (bergamot), *derakht-e kharmā* (palm tree), *derakht-e murad* (case tree), and *bid* (willow). Meanwhile, another lady was arranging some carpets that had been used for the celebration of the Sukkot.

The second synagogue, which is called Ezra Yaghoub, consists of a large courtyard with a small pool at its centre. The structure is that of a typical ancient Persian house. On the right side of the courtyard there was a big hut still decorated for the Sukkot celebration.

Figure15: Decoration for the *jashn-e sāiebān-hā* (Sukkot) at the Ezra Yaghoub synagogue. Personal picture, Tehran, November 2019.

⁷⁵ Renzo Giorgetti, Spazio vissuto e identità, Arianna editrice, Settembre 23 2008. Accessed on 26 October 2021. Available online at: https://www.ariannaeditrice.it/articolo.php?id_articolo=21275

⁷⁶ Sukkot it is also translated as the Feast of Tabernacles.

⁷⁷ The construction of the Molla Hanina synagogue dates back to 1893 A.D. The owner, Mr. Molla Hanina wanted to dedicate part of his house to a public classroom for teaching Judaism and the Torah. Classes were held every day with daily tefillot in his house.



The floor where the hut was standing, it was covered with beautiful and colourful Persian carpets that Yousef proudly showed me. He explained to me the meaning of the festival as follows:

During the *Jashn-e Sāiebān-hā* we commemorate the life of the Jews in the desert after being in Egypt, on their way to the promised land. During their forty years of travel in the desert after the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. During their pilgrimage they lived in *sāiebān*, huts. The word ‘sukkot’ is the plural of the Hebrew word ‘*sukah*’ which means hut. It is a very important celebration for all Jews in the world. We Iranian Jews build the hut in our own way and, as true Iranians, Persian carpets cannot be missed. We do not want to change any Jewish tradition that has accompanied the celebration for centuries, we just want to add something that for us, as Iranians, is culturally important⁷⁸.

My interviewees told me that the very essence of being Iranians is the sharing of a same sense of belonging with the other communities, who are different in terms of ethnicity, language, and religion but still Iranians. Esther, in this regard, explains to me:

We are proud Iranian Jews, and we celebrate all the Iranian and the Jewish festivities. The most important celebration for us, as Iranians, is Nowruz. Our mother tongue is Farsi, and we do not speak any other language. As Jews, we are really close to Nowruz also because this celebration is very close to the Passover.

The strong sense of belonging that the Iranian Jews share with Iran is also a sense of protection of their sacred places, synagogues and family homes and a strong

⁷⁸ Personal interview. Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

connection to their past. In an interview published by the magazine *Tablet* in 2017, Aviva, an old woman of Teheran said:

When I die, I want to die in my land; I want to be buried next to my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. This is where they drew their first and last breaths. This is where they wept their joys of joy and sorrow. Their blood, sweat, and lives are all part of the soil, and the sky here, and mine is as well. This is my home.⁷⁹

An intense connection with Iran is expressed also by the words of a middle-aged Iranian Jewish woman who has been interviewed by Arlene Dallalgar in 2009. The woman talks to all Iranian Jews in the West. She says:

I am speaking to all Jewish Iranians. During your life, do you ever remember a second in which you have been Iranian, not Jewish? Or do you remember a second in which you have been Jewish, not Iranian? Being Iranian and being Jewish, at least for us, are not two concepts, patched together. It's the story of head and body; if they are separated, the head isn't a head, and the body isn't a body. The Jewish Iranian will always be a Jewish Iranian. Denying Iranian identity is actually denying Jewish identity. Do the conspirators and /or their audience not know that if a Jewish Iranian denies being Iranian, he will no longer be Jewish, either?⁸⁰

During my fieldwork in Tehran, I could feel the strong sense of attachment that the Jews still share with Oudlājān, the place of their childhood memories and of their best moments of life. Many times, people felt emotional when talking about Oudlājān, especially while recalling the memories of their mothers walking in the streets of the quarter and remembering their families. During a breakfast offered to me by a group of Jews in the Ezra Yaghoub synagogue, Shamsi, with melancholy, states:

Oudlājān is my life; I was born here; I was born exactly down there⁸¹ and I stayed here until I was thirty. Also my school was here. Everything was here for me, and all my life is related to this place⁸².

3.5 Stories of return to Oudlājān

This paragraph is constructed with a collection of stories of return to Oudlājān. Most of these stories are from the Jews who still live in Tehran and use to go to Oudlājān every week for the celebration of the Shabbat, and for the most important Jewish ceremonies. Other interesting stories are from the Jews who have left Iran, especially after the mass migration in the wake of the Iranian revolution of 1979. They have told me their sensations and feelings in returning to Oudlājān, recalling the stories of their families. In both cases, women, men and young people who go

⁷⁹ Interview with Aviva, appeared in an article of Majid Rafizadeh, 'I Want to Die in My Homeland': Why Some Iranian Jews Stay, *Tablet* magazine, 30 June 2017. Accessed in January 2020: <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/why-some-iranian-jews-stay>

⁸⁰ Farideh Goldin, Introduction to *Nashim*, *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 18, (Fall 2009): 5-12, esp. 11.

⁸¹ She showed me a specific place in the centre of the square.

⁸² Personal interview with Yousef. Tehran November 2019. My translation of Persian.

to Oudlājān every Shabbat or visit it when going back to Iran are like pilgrims fulfilling a nostalgic return to a place which once was their home. Nowadays, this little strip of land in the suburbs of Tehran still represents for many Jews the sacred soil of their beloved motherland.⁸³

The memories of the quarter, which the former dwellers share, have echoed the formation of a strong and durable «sense of place»⁸⁴, a feeling of belonging that still binds, after so many years, the Jews of Tehran to their beloved neighbourhood. In all these stories, I have found the same need for preservation of the quarter and of the community. As referred by Eshagh Amram-Shaoul, an Iranian Jew living in the United States who spent all his life in retracing his roots in Oudlājān, «our grandchildren need to know where we came from»⁸⁵.

3.5.1 *An everyday return to Oudlājān*

Despite the great difficulties that the Jews (and, of course, Iranians in general), had faced since the founding of the Islamic republic, a large number of Iranian Jews decided to stay in Iran. The main reason that led many Jews to stay in Iran is the same as for millions of Muslim and Christian Iranians: Iran is their homeland. Among the thousands of Jews who live in Iran today, there are also many former Oudlājān dwellers, whom I had the chance to meet during my fieldworks in the quarter in 2019. Many of these people, as referred by one of my interviewees, still feel that they belong to Oudlājān, and they want to preserve their relationship with the quarter through re-appropriation of its spaces. Even though Tehran, generally speaking, is a city in which religiosity is preserved and maintained also officially, Oudlājān is for many Jews the place where to find their roots and traditions. As the place where to practice religion, to pray and where to celebrate Jewish festivities, Oudlājān still represents their ‘Jewishness’.

All the people I have met in Oudlājān talked about the same desire of preservation of the quarter, which is performed also frequenting the two small synagogues that are still fully active in the quarter rather than the bigger and modern synagogues in the North of the capital.

During my second visit to Oudlājān in November 2019 I had the chance to assist at two Shabbat’s ceremonies in the synagogues and to understand the value of the quarter for the former dwellers. The Mollah Haninah synagogue is located in a central area of the quarter, in a chaotic street in front of the Sapir hospital. At the entrance of the building there is no sign that identifies this as a synagogue, other than a star of David that is covered by a small metal plate.

⁸³ Monica Mereu, *Oudlājān Memories. The Iranian Jewish Community of Tehran from a Female Perspective*, in *The Jewish Diaspora after 1945: A Study of Jewish Communities in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. S. Behnaz Hosseini (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 2-26.

⁸⁴ The term is used to characterize the relationship between people and the spatial settings, which holds a special meaning for them. The sense of place can be described as a complex concept of emotion and attachment to the human environment which is created from people adoption and use of places. This relationship is created from interaction between people and the place. See: Hashemnezhad Hashem et al., *Comparison the concepts of sense of place and attachment to place in architectural studies*, *Malaysia Journal of Society and Space* 9, no. 1 (2013): 107-117, esp. 107.

⁸⁵ Eshagh Amram-Shaou, <http://sarechal.com/NewMainPages/Purpose.html>. Accessed on 11 March 2021.

Figure16: Entrance of Mollah Hanina synagogue. Personal picture, November 2019.



Nevertheless, the presence of the synagogue in that place is easily detected by the number of men who enter and leave the building wearing the typical Jewish religious hat, the kippah.

The synagogue has a very decadent facade, with peeling walls like all the buildings in the neighbourhood. It is, however, still a welcoming place, where a metal door, which remains open during the celebrations, welcomes any visitor. The door that remains open and unattended during the ceremonies has been a topic of discussion between me and some of the faithful. Indeed, in relation to this there is also an important aspect linked to safety of Jewish places of worship, which is strongly felt both in Europe and in America. A middle-aged lady told me:

We are not afraid of being Jews. On the contrary, in other parts of the world, like in Turkey there is a lot of antisemitism and also in a multicultural city like Istanbul. I have been there, and I have noticed that there is a museum of Judaism where there is the highest level of security I have ever seen: for instance, they take your passport, and they do a physical inspection. Anti-Semitism, in my opinion, is not a sentiment that is rooted in Iran. I do not know if there was anti-Semitism in the past, but for sure there is not anymore.⁸⁶ For example, yesterday, during his usual Friday evening speech, Ayatollah Khamenei spent about twenty-five minutes talking about the Tehrani Jews. The truth is that Iran is the best place to live for Jews in the whole Middle East, even better than Israel. Jews in Iran are very frugal and businessmen⁸⁷.

⁸⁶ She refers that the only story of deep antisemitism she knew from Iran is the story of the Mashahdi, the Jews of Mashhad. These Mashhadi Jews are usually called *Anusim*, (from the Hebrew word ‘anus’, which literally means ‘to hide’), because they were forced to convert (literally ‘to hide their religion’), to Islam in 1839 and to live secretly as Jews for several generations. For an interesting analysis on the Mashahdi see: Ariane Sadjed, Conversion, Identity, and Memory in Iranian-Jewish Historiography: The Jews of Mashhad, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 2 (2021): 235–251.

⁸⁷ Personal interview, Tehran, November 2019.

Before I started my research on Tehrani Jews, I was warned that it would have been very difficult for a foreigner, especially a non-Jewish woman, to participate in the life of the community, and to attend ceremonies inside the synagogues. This is only partly true: in fact, I have so far found it very difficult to enter synagogues that are located in the northern neighbourhoods of Tehran. To enter these synagogues a special permit was required, and it had to be signed by the government authorities and approved by the Tehrani Jewish Committee. In Oudlajān, however, the situation is quite different. The synagogues are a place of conciliation and union, where authorization is, in general, not required. In addition, compared to the information I had previously been given regarding the ban on non-Jews from entering the synagogue, during my visit to the quarter I was accompanied by a dear Iranian Muslim friend, Sareh.

In the synagogue of Mollah Haninah, before the start of the Shabbat celebration, I was welcomed by a group of former Oudlajān dwellers who showed me the entire building. The interior maintains the charm and beauty of the past, despite the decadence of the outside. The Rabbi explains to me:

Churches are built facing to the East, the direction in which the sun rises, whereas synagogues are built facing the direction of Jerusalem. In front of the altar, where there's the *Parochet* (curtain), we keep the Holy Torah. In general, around the Torah there is silver or gold. And usually they are from three hundred to five hundred years old. This is why they can be stolen. This synagogues has been robbed two or three times so far.⁸⁸

Mollah Haninah synagogue is quite small but has two floors: the lower floor was originally designated for men, while the second one was reserved for women. Nowadays, the ceremonies are held only on the first floor, because the number of Jews, especially women, who attend the ceremonies in this synagogue is relatively small. Ladies, who were just five that day of November, were located on the left side of the synagogue. They were following the Rabbi's reading of the Torah from a special book showing a Persian-Hebrew translation. As they told me proudly later, it was the Jewish Women's Prayer Book in Persian that was published by the Iranian Jewish Women's organization (*Sāzemān- e bānvān-e yahud-e Irān*), which had operated in Oudlajān since the 1947⁸⁹. Ten men were attending the services from the right side of the synagogue. Among them, an old man, who had a prominent beard and an old *kippah*, caught my attention. He was following the prayer from an old Torah. At the end of the service I noticed that everyone was showing him respect and devotion, from what I assumed he was someone really important for the community. Then, someone introduced him to me referring as a *Cohen*, the *mollah* of the community and also the *mohel*, the person in charge of performing the circumcision.

Figure17: Shabbat celebration inside the Mollah Hanina synagogue. Personal picture, November 2019.

⁸⁸ Personal interview, Tehran, November 2019.

⁸⁹ See chapter 1 for more information on that argument.



Some men and women stayed with me after the end of the service and accepted to talk with me about their memories of Oudlajān. The aim was to understand why Oudlajān means so much for them even today. The reason can be found in what Oudlajān has been for them in the past, namely the place of their family and of their childhood. Shamsi tells me:

Returning to Oudlajān is a need for many of us. Now that also my parents died, I come here to retrace my memories of them.

Another man explains that he is used to go to Oudlajān every week because he finds peace and serenity in the quarter. He explains:

Life in Tehran is difficult because we live our days frantically. In Oudlajān I find myself, I find peace. The rhythms here in the south are no less frenetic, but the conformity of the neighbourhood makes it a small oasis of peace in the chaos of the city.

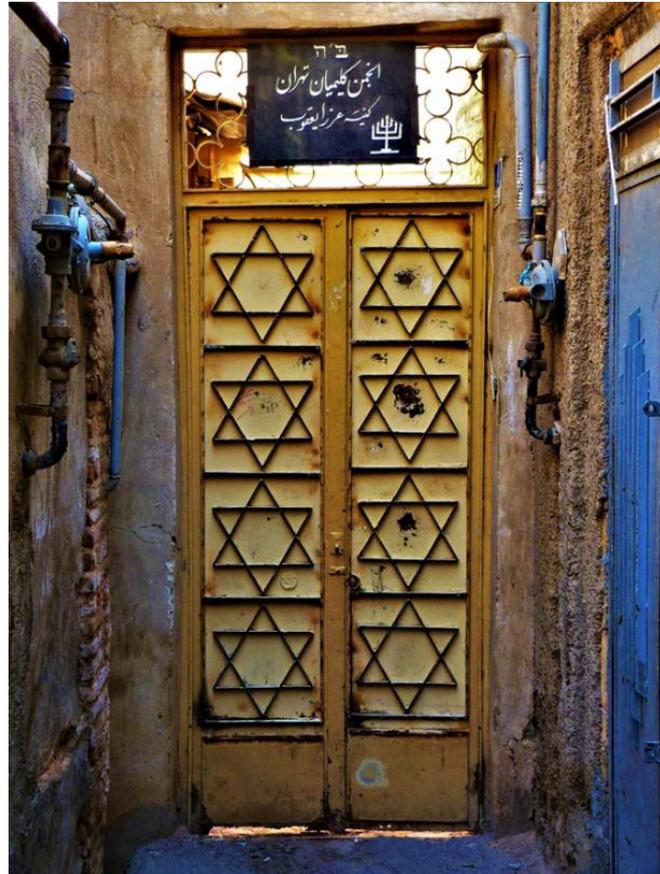
Among the ten men who were attending the services, there were also few young boys who had their parents or grandparents living in Oudlajān. For this relatively small group of young Jews, Oudlajān represents their family origins. As it had been in the past for those little boys who lived in the old Jewish quarter and who talked about their relatives who came from different Iranian cities, these young people can proudly reconstruct their origins in Oudlajān. In this regard, the quarter becomes a place of memories and traditions for them. The rabbi of the synagogue argues:

Generally speaking, the synagogues of Oudlajān are not the most favourite among the Jews of Tehran today, especially for the new generation. The young and urban generation of Iranian Jews today seems to be disaffected from the history and the traditions of the old quarter, and from everything it represents:

their memories and their stories. Luckily, there are still young Jews like them who want to know the history of their community.

The second synagogue that I have visited in Oudlajān is the old Ezra Yaghoub synagogue.

Figure18: Entrance of the Ezra Yaghoub synagogue. Personal picture, August 2019.



This place is linked to many memories I was told during my interviews and, especially in the past, it held an important value in the history of the community. Nonetheless, Ezra Yaghoub is today less frequented than the synagogue of Mollah Hanina. Indeed, only nine people were present during my visit for the celebration of the Shabbath and they were all men. They told me that sometimes they struggle to reach the ‘*asara*’⁹⁰, which is the word used to indicate the quorum of ten men who are necessary for the daily prayer in the synagogue.

⁹⁰ The corresponding of ‘Minyan’ in Hebrew.

Figure19: Shabbat celebration inside the Ezra Yaghoub synagogue. Personal picture, November 2019.



Despite the very small number of the faithful, this synagogue still has a fundamental role for the community, a role that has been handed down to this day by tradition. Indeed, as it was in the past when the community of Tehrani Jews was concentrated in Oudlajan, Ezra Yaghoub is the only synagogue where the *matzah* (unleavened flatbread) is cooked. As told me by my interviewees, the important Jewish festival of Passover is centred around the retelling of the Biblical story of the Jewish people being freed from slavery in Egypt. Moreover, the Passover celebration requires various specific rituals, like the '*seder*' which means 'order'. This is specifically a religious service set around a dinner table, whose rituals are prescribed by the book called the Haggadah. During the Seder the table is set with specific food and among this there are three pieces of *matzah*, which represent the bread the Israelites took with them when they fled Egypt. The fact that this ancient Jewish tradition, like the preparation of this special bread, is held in Ezra Yaghoub, gave to the synagogue a special place in the heart of the community. Indeed, this synagogue during Passover celebration, which is approximately in the Persian month of Esfand, serves the whole community across Tehran.

The group of men who return to Oudlajān every weekend for the celebration of the Shabbat is a group of elderly men, with different stories and with different pasts.

Figure20: Shabbat celebration inside the Ezra Yaghoub synagogue. Personal picture, November 2019.



Among them there are men who have always lived in Iran or who, like the youngest of the group, lived abroad until a few years earlier. In this group I have also met the famous Haroun Yashayaie who is «the ambassador of a Jewish community rooted in an old Tehran that no longer exist»⁹¹ and whose book was a fundamental research basis for this thesis.

Among these men, Yousef was the happiest to talk to me and share his memories of Oudlajān. Regarding the situation of the Jews in Tehran today, he explains:

Most of the Jews have now moved to other parts of Tehran, to the North and East of the capital. Until the 1940s the Jews lived in Oudlajān, where there were thirteen active synagogues, schools, and a hospital. Nowadays there is no one living in Oudlajān. The situation now is completely different: all the synagogues are in the North of Teheran and just few remains in Oudlajān. We are here trying to preserve the two synagogues that remain active in the old quarter. It is not easy because we all come from the North of the city, and none of us lives here. The reason why we still come here is because we, as Iranian Jews, still need to live close to our own traditions.⁹²

In both synagogues there were two posters that caught my attention. The first one was a special calendar with all the Jewish and Persian festivities, both in Hebrew and Persian.

The second one was the poster of the martyrs of Jewish heritage. At the top there was the official flag of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was held at the corners by two white doves. In the remaining part, there was a drawing of a field of tulips

⁹¹ Aran, The defender.

⁹² Personal interview, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

(the tulip is a symbol of martyrdom) and on it stood the photos of fifteen martyrs, including two women.

Figure21: Picture of the poster of the martyrs of Jewish heritage that was given to me by a lady during my visit to the Mollah Hanina synagogue.



The community of Teheran counts, in total, fifteen martyrs, of which six are buried in Behesthie cemetery and five in Damavan cemetery. Six of them died during the 1979 Revolution, while the remaining nine during the Iran-Iraq war. The presence of that poster struck me, especially in a sacred place like a synagogue. The answer I was given is that the synagogue is a place of prayer and refuge for the Jews. In particular, the synagogues of Oudlajān are the deepest symbol of the community and therefore they are also places of remembrance of the troubled history that the Jews have experienced in recent decades. Moreover, as suggested by an interviewee:

We, as Iranians, believe in the ideology of martyrdom and the sacredness of sacrificing oneself for one's homeland must be commemorated in a place as sacred as the synagogue.

3.5.2 *Returning from outside*

The Jewish community of Oudlajān knew different destinies. During my fieldwork I met people who shared a variety of stories. Many of these were stories of migration that had brought so many families out of Iran. For one man, for example, the abandonment of the quarter coincided with his departure to Israel, where his father

hoped to find economic stability that would allow him to raise his large family with dignity. Someone left Iran for the same reason but fled to the United States or to Europe.⁹³ Despite the different situations, all these stories of migration had in common the fact that these people had spent their childhood in Oudlajān. Yousef explains:

Iran lost the majority of its Jewish citizens after the 1979 Revolution, but the process of migration started earlier and mostly for economic reasons. During Pahlavi time, in 1948 the State of Israel was formed, and many Jewish families migrated there. The first ones migrated from this quarter (Oudlajān). During that time Oudlajān was mostly a poor neighbourhood, while in the past it was a prosperous quarter. The interesting point is that, for example, under Nasser Eddin Shah, when the first demographic statistic was made, the most educated people of Tehran were the Jews who used to live in Oudlajān. Moreover, many famous people used to live here. At the time of the late Shah, the quarter was transformed into a commercial and proletarian neighbourhood, and the wealthiest families moved North, in the area of Yusef Abad or Si-e Tir. The poorest migrated elsewhere, like to Israel or Europe. Then, after the Revolution, we had a significant migration: 36,000 Jews went to Israel in twenty years, the majority moved to America.⁹⁴

For the people who migrated before the Revolution it is easy to come back to Iran as much as they want. Among these there are Eshagh Amram-Shaou, an Iranian Jew living in the United States, who created the website Sarechal.com, and Mohsen, whom I had interviewed in December 2020.

Both of them in their memories have emphasized their relationship with Oudlajān, which is still the source of their identity as Jews and Iranians, even though today it is a completely different quarter. For these men, who experienced the abandonment of the quarter and later the abandonment of Iran, there is still a deep sentiment of belonging. For example, Mohsen told me that when he comes back to Iran, the first place he visits is always his ancient neighbourhood. Oudlajān is the place where he finds his roots and where to cultivate his Iranian identity. He explains his first visit to the quarter with these words:

I visited Oudlajān for the first time after my departure from Iran with all my family. When I arrived at the quarter, I had immediately noticed that everything was different than the quarter I knew: in *Kucheh-ye Haft Kenise*, which now has changed its name, there were no synagogues anymore. I was shocked because of the fourteen synagogues of my childhood just two were active. Apparently, there was not much in Oudlajān that could think that it was a Jewish neighbourhood, my neighbourhood: first of all the quarter is completely in ruins and ninety percent of the inhabitants are Muslims. Nevertheless, I could perfectly recognize that it was my quarter, and I could perfectly find my childhood memory there. Moreover, I was really happy because all the people I met (Muslim), the new inhabitants of my quarter, knew they were living in an old Jewish quarter; they also knew the name of the people from whom they bought their houses, and some had great memories of the people that lived there. I felt home again⁹⁵.

⁹³ All the people I have interviewed left Iran before the 1979 Revolution, so they are not part of the so-called 'Iranian diaspora' that followed the revolution.

⁹⁴ Personal interview, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

⁹⁵ Personal online interview with Mohsen, December 2020.

Mohsen and Eshagh, as many other Iranians in different decades, experienced a loss of their former homeland; this experience also led to the dissolution of their community, their routine and everything they knew by that time. This geographical and social distance with their homeland made the spaces of their childhood, where their mentality and their identity were built, as special and meaningful places.

Mohsen told me that the first time he returned to Oudlajān he also brought his wife, who is not Iranian, and his children. Many people told me that actually there are a lot of young Jews of Iranian heritage who usually come to Oudlajān trying to reconstruct the story of their families. The sentiment of respect and devotion that the younger generation still shares with the old quarter represents the *fil rouge* of a sentiment of belonging that never ended in all those years, after all the events that occurred in the country. The strong sense of place this new generation has with the quarter was learned from the experience of the elders, and it is built through a long tradition of stories and memories.

3.6 Oudlajān: a heritage to be preserved

In the last decades the Oudlajān quarter knew a deep urban marginalization and a strong social stigmatization. These phenomena, as already specified, are also the consequence of the relocation of various functions that were historically placed at the centre of Tehran towards the new places of attraction of the metropolitan polycentricity. From an urban perspective, the concentration of the most important activities in the North of Tehran and the creation of quarters that can be distinguished by social classes begets economic degradation in Oudlajān, which begets social degradation.

During the first years of the 1979 Revolution, the Oudlajān quarter, which was an extremely isolated and forgotten place located at the margin of the capital, suffered of a deep social segregation. One of the most difficult problems was that the quarter became a place for prostitution. Many former Jewish buildings that had been previously abandoned, like the daily care centre, were illegally occupied and converted into brothels. Asal, sadly, explains to me what happened to the daily care centre. She says:

In the past, the Jamshid quarter was known as the Tehrani centre for prostitution. In 1979 it was completely closed, and those women were scattered to the rest of the city. Some of them concentrated here in Oudlajān. The old daily care centre was occupied and converted into a brothel. The Jewish community protested a lot, demanding for the immediate closure of the building. The situation also affected the perception some people had about the former Jewish dwellers. Indeed, for the fact that it was originally a Jewish building it became infamous in the city as the place where Jewish women used to provide services. Our effort, led to the closure of the brothel after six-seven months.⁹⁶

Only in recent years, the Oudlajān quarter from an urban space of segregation and a bearer of marginality knew various dynamics of partial regeneration. This phenomena started from a new sensibility toward the periphery that is now going to influence the way in which the South of Tehran is perceived and developed.

⁹⁶ Personal interview with Asal. Tehran, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

Actually, after a long period of marginalization and segregation that was characterized by disinterest, neglect and pauperization, the quarter is now going under important transformations.

As I will examine later in this paragraph, this process can be defined as a ‘reconquest’ or ‘re-appropriation’⁹⁷ of the centre of Tehran. This took place both as a result of a political strategy, and as a manifestation of a process of transformation that was generated by different categories of social groups and economic actors. Moreover, this was possible thanks to the effort of the former Jewish dwellers who showed a new sensibility towards the neighbourhood, as a heritage of memory that needs to be preserved.

3.6.1 The concept of heritage in the Iranian context

The regeneration of the urban fabric of the Oudlajān quarter was undertaken thanks to the impetus of two forces, one acting nationally and one internationally. They were both linked to a new conception of historical heritage as the guardian of the memory of a country. Actually, the idea of ‘heritage’ is a very complex concept, especially because it varies from country to country.⁹⁸ Moreover, as specified by Rico, heritage is «a product of a selective appreciation and safeguarding of meanings and values, associated with a certain perception of the past and informed by identity politics, nation-building agendas, and other factors»⁹⁹. For example, in Iran throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century the notion of cultural heritage was «regarded primarily as an archaeological remnant»¹⁰⁰, namely a specific objects or monument that had to be preserved because it was considered to have an «intrinsic value as testimonials to a lost civilization»¹⁰¹. During the Pahlavi era and under the Islamic Republic of Iran, the concept was more linked to the question of the Iranian identity. This means that it was rhetorically based on the idea of Iran’s rich and distinct heritage.¹⁰²

In 2011, with the aim of providing a unique definition, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) introduced the concept of ‘Historic Urban landscape’ (36 C/ Resolution 41) to help to protect historic urban settings. As specified by the report of the Second Consultation on the implementation of ‘The UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape’ (2019), Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape called on «member States to integrate conservation and management of cultural heritage in cities and settlements with policies and practices for sustainable urban development. This innovative standard-setting instrument embraces the power of

⁹⁷ Catherine Bidou-Zachariassen, *Retours en ville - des processus de gentrification urbaine aux politiques de revitalisation des centres*, (Paris: Descartes et Cie, collection Les urbanités, 2003).

⁹⁸ For an exhaustive work on the concept of heritage in Iran see: Bijan Rouhani, *Development and cultural heritage in Iran: Policies for an ancient country*, in ICOMOS 17th General Assembly, 2011, Paris, France.

⁹⁹ Trinidad Rico, Heritage at Risk: The Authority and Autonomy of a Dominant Preservation Framework, in *Heritage Keywords: Rhetoric and Redescription in Cultural Heritage*, ed., Trinidad Rico and Kathryn Samuels, (University Press of Colorado, 2015): 147-162, esp. 148.

¹⁰⁰ Eugenio Galdieri and Kerāmat-Allāh Afsar, Conversation and Restoration of Persian Monuments, available at: <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/conservation-and-restoration-of-persian-monuments>. Accessed in October 2021.

¹⁰¹ Galdieri and Afsar, Conversation and Restoration of Persian Monuments. Accessed in October 2021.

¹⁰² Annelies Van de Ven, (De-)Revolutionising the Monuments of Iran, *Historic Environment* 29, no. 3, (2019): 16-29, esp. 18.

cultural heritage to make cities and settlements culturally vibrant, economically prosperous, socially inclusive, and environmentally sustainable»¹⁰³. The recommendation aimed also to «integrate urban conservation with urban planning strategies by focusing on the social and cultural values that people attach to urban areas as well as the built environments»¹⁰⁴. The recommendation was ratified also by the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2011.

At national level, after the 1979 Revolution, a new interest in the nation's cultural and historical heritage emerged. The exaltation of the Iranian heritage, which had its roots in the historical memories of the country, was then the result of the common tendency to exalt localisms against the emergence, all over the world, of the culture of globalization. This rhetoric was aimed to enshrine the value of the protection of the national and cultural heritage, and to preserve a cultural, historical and linguistic unique heritage in the world. In this regard, in 1983, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a decree declaring the necessity of the preservation of the artistic and cultural heritage of Iran, which was perceived as a value of the whole country that belongs to the people.¹⁰⁵ In the early nineties, after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has launched an important campaign for the protection and development of cultural heritage in the country. Actually, the destruction that was caused by the war has brought out a new attention to the cultural heritage and a new need for reconstruction. In this regard, the first step that was taken by the government was the classification of all the historical monuments that were damaged during the war. In August 1989, this list was published by the *Sāzmān-e mīrāt-e farhangī-e Īrān* (Institute for the cultural heritage of Iran) and dispatched all over the world through the various Iranian embassies.¹⁰⁶ After that, the government and the municipalities of the major Iranian cities started new programmes of re-qualification of the old urban fabrics in the whole country. The major initiatives focussed on the construction of proper shelters for museum collections in various parts of the country and in the classification of all Iranian movable and immovable heritages in order to plan a long-term strategy for protection against future intrusions. Moreover, the government strengthened scientific relations with different international institutions, in order to promote a debate about the conservation of cultural heritage.¹⁰⁷

3.6.2 *The requalification of Oudlajān*

The urban redevelopment of Oudlajān is a project that began in the early 2000s and is only now having its most successful results. As we will see, the policies undertaken in the quarter have affected several aspects. First of all, they focussed on the physical recovery and environmental rehabilitation of the neighbourhood with urban renovation and regeneration works that involved the symbolic places of ancient Oudlajān. Furthermore, they focussed on a wider regeneration that touched the social fabric of the quarter, but also its economic and productive system.

¹⁰³ Report of the Second Consultation on its Implementation by Member States, 2019, UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Accessed in October 2021. Available at: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/hul/>

¹⁰⁴ Report of the Second Consultation on its Implementation by Member States, 2019, UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

¹⁰⁵ Galdieri and Afsar, *Conversation and Restoration*.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁷ Report on Iran of Rasool Vatandoust & Akbar Zargar for ICOMOS - World Reports on Monuments and Sites in Danger (2001-2002). Available at: <https://www.icomos.org/risk/2001/iran2001.htm>

Basically, the focus was on giving the neighbourhood a new face, as an artistic space dedicated mostly to young people. The attention toward the requalification of the old Jewish quarter was possible because Oudlajān, as the «last remnants of old Tehran»¹⁰⁸, started to be perceived as a heritage site that needed to be requalified and preserved. The policy of the government of Iran was initially aimed at preserving these historical sites that were linked to the Islamic Revolution. In this regard, the *Bimārestān-e Sapir*, for the important role that it had during the Revolution, was the first in the quarter to be designed as a protected historic monument.

The first official initiative concerning the whole Oudlajān was the inclusion of the quarter in the list of national heritages on the part of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization in 2006. Later on, in 2011, the municipality of Tehran started a renovation of the area with the aim of giving the quarter a new life. In this regard, many old buildings, «which present unique samples of architectural-related art crafts: such as brick carving, mirror work and stucco carving that have deep roots in Iran»¹⁰⁹, have been renovated. Among these there are also various buildings that belonged to the Jewish community, like the old Jewish Jeweller House, which is located near Amir Kabir Avenue, and the old *hammām-e keshvarie*. Many historic buildings have come back to life with new functions, such as the old Jewish bank, called Timche Akbarian, that has now become a famous restaurant, which is mentioned as one of the best place for eating *dizi* in Iran. The sign outside the restaurant reports the story of the place that dates back to almost 260 years. Indeed, during the Qajar its main purpose was the exchange of gold. Later, it became the first bank of Iran that was run by Jews.

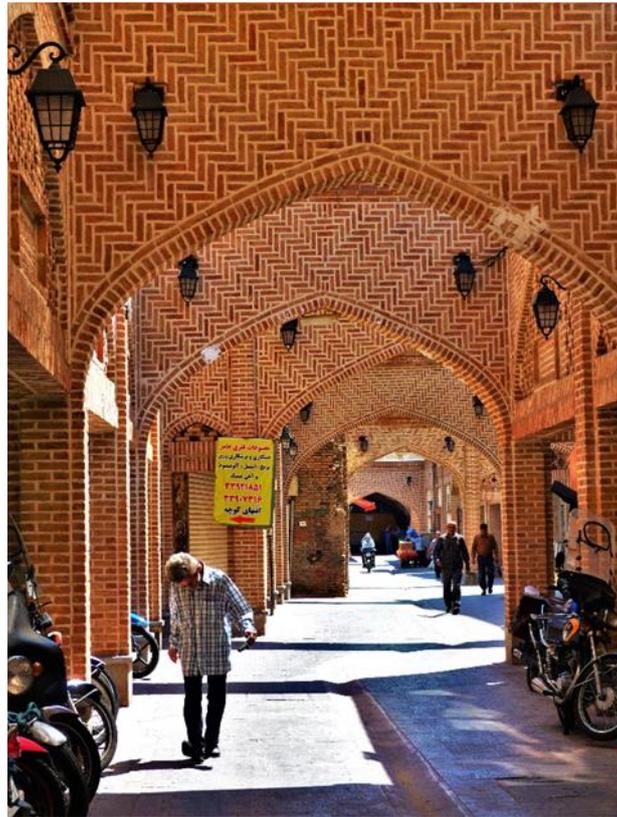
In addition, many avenues have been rebuilt on the model of the old streets of the quarter, like the important *hājihā* alley that connects the centre of Oudlajān with the Golestan Palace and the *bāzār-e bozorg*.

Figure22: The *hājihā* alley. Personal picture. August 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Navid Jamali and Mina Fatemi, A Visit to Oudlajan, Unremembered Remnant of Old Tehran, Tavoos- Art Magazine 2015. Accessed in November 2021. Available at:

<http://www.tavoosonline.com/Articles/ArticleDetailEn.aspx?src=214&Page=1>

¹⁰⁹ Jamali and Fatemi, A Visit to Oudlajan.



One of the most important initiatives was the renovation, in 2012, of the old Oudlajan bazaar, a historic shopping route¹¹⁰ that in the past had around two-hundred shops.¹¹¹ The renovation of the bazaar was one of the most appreciated initiatives by the former inhabitants of Oudlajān, because this street has an important historical and social value for the Jewish community. Many of the stories that were told to me were set in this street and for many interviewees their childhood memories were linked to this place and to the traders who worked there. Thanks to the renovations, the old bazaar of the quarter has maintained the same ancient architectural structure and the same function: in the street there are still shops and restaurants like in the past time. In addition, in 2015 the street has been converted into a wonderful and colourful handicraft bazaar¹¹², a permanent exhibition of Iranian handicrafts, most of which are run by young local artists.

¹¹⁰ My interviewees date it back to 300 years old.

¹¹¹ In 2012, to redevelop the Oudlajan bazaar, a tripartite agreement with a participatory approach was conducted between the Municipality of District 12, the Heritage Organisation, and shop owners. My interviewees told me that this was possible also thanks to the effort of the Jewish committee.

¹¹² The renovation of the old bazaar was also highly appreciated internationally. The results of the work were also mentioned in Giorgio Passerini and Stefano Ricci, *The Sustainable City XIV*, WIT Transactions on Ecology and the Environment 249, (WIT Press, 2020): 319-333.

Figure23: The renovation of the Oudlajān bazaar. Personal picture, November 2019.

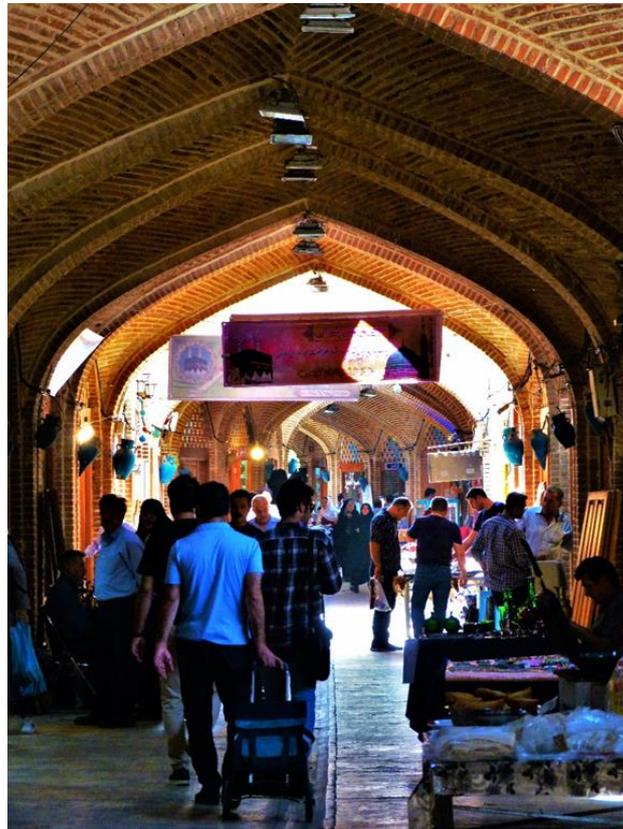


Figure24: The renovation of the Oudlajān bazaar. Personal picture, July 2019.



Figure25: The renovation of the Oudlajān bazaar. Personal picture, August 2019.



In recent decades, attention to Oudlajān has grown considerably and the quarter is increasingly the focus of the work of numerous researchers, especially architects and artists. Anyway, one of the most valuable projects concerning Oudlajān is the so-called ‘Saving Oudlajān’, which was performed by the Iranian architect and designer Keyvan Khosrovani¹¹³ in the late 1970s. It was an exhibition of original sketches by Keyvan Khosrovani that were displayed on the mud walls of the narrow streets of the old Jewish quarter. As specified in the architect’s website

The local residents embraced the efforts, and the exhibition was up for ten days. The public street exhibition culminated with an outdoor concert by pop singer, Faramarz Aslani. With the help of volunteers from Iranian TV the Oudlajān concert was broadcasted over the following week on national radio and TV networks. The publicity generated by the set of events highlighted Oudlajān and was successful in preventing the demolition of this historic urban district¹¹⁴.

Actually, the idea of the architect was one the first important attempts that was made to generate public awareness of the local cultural heritage that the quarter still represents.

¹¹³ <https://www.keyvankhosrovani.com/biography/>

¹¹⁴ <https://www.keyvankhosrovani.com/saving-oudlajan/>

3.6.3 Historical Oudlajān: finding a link between heritage and social space

All the new plans that have been made for regeneration of the Oudlajān neighbourhood focussed mostly on social and participatory aspects.¹¹⁵ Indeed, for urban planners it is still a challenge to find a «balance between safeguarding historic-cultural values and responding to the new necessities of the citizens»¹¹⁶.

According to the category that has been theorized by Maurizio Carta, the requalification of Oudlajān that we have previously analysed had followed mainly four dimensions.¹¹⁷

The first one is the ‘reconnection’. The renovation works had the aim of making Oudlajān more accessible and usable also for the outsiders, by promoting the urban network that connects the North and South of the Iranian capital. Furthermore, the rebuilding of the *hājihā* alley was functional also in terms of tourism: indeed, the street connects more touristic places such as the Golestan Palace to Oudlajān. In this regard, the quarter, which has the potential to become an attractive tourist area,¹¹⁸ can be more accessible also for tourists. The historical heritage that Oudlajān preserves, especially as a symbol of a community often forgotten in Iranian historical narrative, must play a major role in attracting tourists to Tehran. As argued by Hakimian, Afshar, and Kowalczyk-Anioł, «historical urban spaces (valuable urban fabric), due to the presence of nostalgic attractions, architectural, cultural, and valuable buildings, and religious conditions of the period which they belong to, have the ability to increase the importance and attractiveness of the city»¹¹⁹. The expansion of tourism in Oudlajān can be a smart strategy for the implementation of tourism in Tehran, a city that has a rich but un-used historical and tourism potential.

The second point in the strategy of re-qualification of Oudlajān was the ‘regeneration’. This term means both the intervention on the physical degradation of the neighbourhood, and the intervention to combat exclusion and social marginalization. In this regard, the care of important public spaces and the renovation of the symbolic places of the old quarter, which are sites of memories that belonged to different communities, are contributing to the rebirth of Oudlajān as a social space.

The third aspect concerns the ‘polycentralization’. This is generally implemented through the localization of metropolitan functions in the more decentralized areas of the city, which are then capable of facilitating the localization of commercial and recreational activities. As regards Oudlajān, the symbol of ‘polycentralization’ is the construction of the handicraft bazaar, which attracts many young people, providing them with a space to exchange ideas and also a working space.

The last aspect regards the ‘resilience’. The renewal of the neighbourhood has brought an otherwise abandoned area to new life. This has had important consequences, both in the economy and in the social fabric, above all because the

¹¹⁵ Media Akim and Hamid Majedi, Renovation of the world’s deteriorated textures from perspective of the standard criteria elicitation, *International Journal of Community and Cooperative Study* 3, no.1, (2015): 27-41, esp. 33.

¹¹⁶ Rouhani, *Development and cultural heritage in Iran*.

¹¹⁷ Maurizio Carta, excerpt from the preface to Barbara Lino, *Periferie in trasformazione. Riflessi dai «marginari» delle città*, (Firenze: Alinea, 2013).

¹¹⁸ Hakimian, Afshar, and Kowalczyk-Anioł, *Returning Life*.

¹¹⁹ Ivi, p. 34.

new inhabitants of Oudlajān have felt part of a larger urban reality. This aspect has been specified also in the work of Hakimian, Afshar, and Kowalczyk-Anioł who argued that «the revitalization of Oudlajān seems to be necessary to increase not only its attractiveness and urban vitality, but also sustainability and resilience».¹²⁰

3.7 The Jewish community of Tehran today: the appropriation of the public space

Before the formation of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, there were about 80,000 Jews in Iran, who were living mostly in Tehran (about 60,000). The rest of the population lived in the historical Jewish cities of Shiraz (8,000), Kermanshah (4,000) and Isfahan (3,000). After the victory of the revolution, most Iranian Jews left the country, drastically transforming the demographic situation of the country and of the capital. The data regarding the actual number of Jews still residing in Iran today are not accurate. For this reason it is difficult to provide a precise analysis of the demographic situation of the Jews in the country. According to some press reports, there were about 35,000 Jews in Iran in 1996, of whom about 25,000 were in Tehran. There were about fifty active synagogues in the country, twenty-three of which were located in Tehran.¹²¹ One of the most valid research is that of the demographer Sergio Della Pergola (Hebrew University), who estimated that the Jewish community in Tehran numbered between 9,000 and 12,000 as of 2012.¹²² According to the last census of 2006, the 76,4 percent of the Iranian Jews live in Tehran. The Jewish community of the capital grew especially during the Pahlavi era, and in particular under Mohammad Reza Shah. The migration of the Jews from other parts of Iran to Tehran continued also after the 1979 revolution.

The community of the Iranian Jews today finds its spatial dimension in the capital, which is a multicultural megalopolis and the centre of the cosmopolitan aspirations of the Iranian people. The city is today full of buildings belonging to the community and dispersed in different locations across the city. Tehran has in total thirty-two synagogues, of which only thirteen are active and fully used by the community (of all these synagogues fifteen of them are located in the proximity of the old Oudlajān neighbourhood and only three are active).

The most important active synagogues in Tehran are the synagogues of Yousef-Abād, Abrishami and Bāgh-e Sabā, which are located in the Yousef-Abād neighbourhood, one of the most populated districts of Tehran. Yousef-Abād synagogue is recognized as the largest (it has an area of 1076 square meters) religious and cultural institution of the Jews in the capital. The synagogue was built in the 1930s, following the gradual concentration of Jews around the Yousef-Abād district and the lack of synagogues in the area. The synagogue consists of two floors with a total capacity of more than eight hundred people: the lower floor, which is reserved only to men, has a capacity of five hundred people; the other one that is dedicated to women can allocate three hundred people.

Kanise-ye Bāgh-e Sabā is one of the most important synagogues in the Northeast of Tehran. Its importance is mainly due to the cultural centre that is

¹²⁰ Ivi, p. 32.

¹²¹ Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA). 8 December 1996. BC Cycle. Farshid Motahari. Iranian Jews Voice Devotion to Iranian Homeland. (NEXIS). Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) [Tehran, in English] 24 July 1996. Iran: Iranian Jewish Leader Denies Poor Treatment [of] Jews. (FBIS-NES-96-144 24 Jul. 1996/WNC)

¹²² <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/about/communities/IR>

allocated next to the synagogue and consisting of a library, a reception hall, a smaller synagogue on the first floor, a restaurant, and classrooms. *Kanise-ye Abrishami*, which is located on Palestine Street, was built in 1965. This two-story complex is an important educational centre, with an elementary, middle, and high school. Since this synagogue is located in a densely populated area, the ceremony of *Tefillin* is performed every day on weekdays, especially in Shabbat. Almost every night, Talmud Torah classes are held in this synagogue.¹²³

Historically speaking, the *Kenise-ye Haim*, the *Kenise-ye Aziz-Khān* and the *Kenise-ye Lahestāni-hā* are among the most important ones in Tehran. The Haim Synagogue is a small Orthodox synagogue that was built after the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in 1913, under the reign of Ahmad Shah Qajar. It is the first one constructed just outside the Oudlajān neighbourhood in the south of the capital, and, for that reason, it is considered to be the first urban synagogue in all Iran. Nowadays, the synagogue is only opened for the Shabbat ceremonies. For a short period, during the World War II and the immigration of Polish Jewish refugees in Tehran, the Haim Synagogue was mainly used by European Jews. After an increase in the number of Polish Jewish refugees, a new Ashkenazi synagogue, that is called Dāniāl Synagogue or *Kenise-ye Lahestāni-hā* (Polish synagogue), was built. The *Kenise-ye Lahestāni-hā* is the only Ashkenazi synagogue in Iran today. It has a bigger room for men with a capacity of sixty people, and another one for women, which is located on the south side of the synagogue, with a capacity of twenty-five people.

Kanise-ye Aziz-Khān is one of the oldest synagogues in Tehran outside Oudlajān. It is the second synagogue that was built outside the Oudlajān neighborhood, in the proximity of the older Haim Synagogue that is located less than one kilometer away. It was constructed by the Jewish community of Mashhad, and it was originally called after the name of Bethel. The area in which the synagogue is located is less populated by the Jews than it was in the past; nevertheless, due to its historical importance, *Tefillin* rituals are still performed on weekdays, mainly on special days and Shabbats.

All these three synagogues are in the proximity of 30 Tir-e Street, formerly known as Ghavam Al-Saltaneh Street, which is located in the old part of Tehran. This street is known today as The Street of Religions because it hosts a Zoroastrian Fire temple, a Jewish synagogue, and several Christian churches belonging to different denominations.¹²⁴ The concentration of so many religious buildings in this area is due to the special position that Ghavam Al-Saltaneh Street had in terms of urban context in the capital, with the concentration of important government buildings, several ministries, and the houses of officials. The street was renamed after Ahmad Ghavam (Ghavam Al-Saltaneh), who was Prime Minister during the Qajar and then Pahlavi monarchy. He had built in the area a 7,000-meter garden with a 104-meter building with an octagonal design. This was his residence and office until 1953.¹²⁵

Another important place for the Jews in Tehran is the Beheshtieh Cemetery, sometimes simply called ‘The Jewish Cemetery’¹²⁶ and the Jiliard Cemetery (or Damavan Jewish Cemetery). The first one is famous because there is the tomb of

¹²³ “Kenisa-ye abrishami”, 7dorim.com. Accessed on 10 January 2022.

Available at: http://7dorim.com/Tasavir/kenisa_abrishami.asp

¹²⁴ The most important church is the Evangelical Church of Peter that is more than 135 years old.

¹²⁵ Today this old house is used as the Mirror Art Museum.

¹²⁶ The word Beheshtieh means ‘heavenly place’ in Persian.

the Jewish father of the Farsi dictionary, Soleyman Haïm.¹²⁷ As mentioned earlier, in this cemetery, the tombs of six martyrs of Jewish heritage are found, whereas five of them are buried in Jiliard. The two cemeteries are also home to more than sixty European Jews. Many of the tombstones are made from white marble and have elaborate hand-carved designs, including Stars of David, menorahs, and inscriptions in both Persian and Hebrew. The presence of those two cemeteries is very important for the Jewish community today, and in particular for those Iranian Jews who left Iran. Indeed, these places, which are the memorial sites of entire Jewish families, are important sites of remembrance that help people to maintain their ties to Iran and to their past.

Finally, there is another place that functions as the guardian of the memories of the neighbourhood, collecting the real testimonies of that distant past that is so often obscured by the historical and social vicissitudes that the Jewish community of Oudlajān has experienced in recent decades: the Jewish Elderly Home, located in Imam Hossein Street. The hospice is not just the place that collects memories of the past. In fact, as suggested by Shamsi, the value of the hospice is more sentimental, because old men and women return to live together, as in Oudlajān, and return to feel like a community. In order to preserve the past traditions, in the hospice there is an old machine for industrial goods that provides all bread for Passover for all over Iran and even the Middle East.

Today the Jews of Tehran, with all these schools and religious buildings, show to be a community perfectly integrated into the urban and social fabric of the capital.

3.7.1 The absence of a Jewish neighbourhood in Tehran today

The demographic composition of the Iranian Jews today in different areas of Tehran is variable. According to Yousef, the large majority of Jewish families live in the quarters of the North of Tehran. For example, he does not know anyone who lives in the South¹²⁸ of the town.

There are areas of Tehran where there is a higher concentration of Jews, mainly due to historical reasons and for the presence of Jewish schools and cultural centres, like the neighbourhoods of Sheikh Hadi and Yousef-Abād. The former has been occupied by Jews since the 1940s: in that period there were between 1,350 and 1,400 Jewish households. During the 1960s and 1970s, when Tehran started its urban explosion, the Yousef-Abād neighbourhood was formed, and a lot of Jewish families moved to this area.

Besides these areas that have a higher concentration of Jewish buildings and facilities, in Tehran today there is not a specific district that can be identified as a Jewish neighbourhood. Regarding the Jewish community of Tehran, the phenomenon that Barry defines as 're-ghettoization' cannot be applied. By this term he means «rather than being the forced confinement of minorities by the majority, re-ghettoization refers to voluntary separation from the society»¹²⁹, namely the creation of an urban concentration in which the majority of inhabitants are of the same religion or ethnicity. In modern Tehran this phenomenon is not common,

¹²⁷ The Haïm family is known to Iranians as one of the most esteemed and beloved Persian-Jewish families.

¹²⁸ With the south he intends the part of Tehran located southern of *enqelāb* street.

¹²⁹ James Barry, Re-Ghettoization: Armenian Christian Neighborhoods in Multicultural Tehran, *Iranian Studies* 50, no. 4, (2017): 553-573, esp. 554.

unlike for the community of the Armenians. Indeed, they manifest a growing tendency to associate only with other Armenians and to remain isolated from the social and political life of the capital.

After the formation of the Islamic Republic and the forced Islamization of the public space there has been a «relative communalization of sociability practices»¹³⁰ within the religious minorities of the country. Nevertheless, as specified by Vivier Muresan, this phenomenon «did not necessarily lead to the fostering of cohesive religious neighbourhoods»¹³¹. In this regard, the case of the Armenians, who use to retreat to only Armenian spaces, remains an isolated phenomenon that Barry analyses as «their response to discriminatory measures»¹³². This can be also examined as related to the particular situation of the Armenians in Iran, who have maintained a different identity of their own, far from the Persian paradigm, but above all far from the Islamic one, in which, on the contrary, the Jews were able to integrate themselves by sharing the same peculiarities. Moreover, differently from the Jews who are proud Iranians, the Armenians continue to define themselves only Armenians. In this respect, the Armenian quarter of Tehran «represents a desire [...] to re-create Armenia in Tehran»¹³³.

Shamsi, when talking about this peculiar difference between the Jews and the Armenians of Tehran, uses this provokative sentence:

Just walk around the street of Tehran and try to ask an Armenian where he comes from; without hesitation he will answer that he comes from Armenia. A Jew will answer by remembering from which Iranian city he comes from; from which Iranian city his family originates from.¹³⁴

3.7.2 Teheran: a multicultural city

The city of Tehran today is an open place of convergence, a fluid space of human and religious interactions. For that reason, the capital is nowadays the mirror of a multicultural nation. Indeed, more than other cities in Iran, Tehran has now become a city of belonging and sharing, where, at least in the last half of the century, the cultural life and socio-political activities that have influenced the whole country have been concentrated.

Tehran is not only home to the highest number of Jews in Iran today; thanks to the concentration of universities the capital has also become a centre of attraction for Jews from all over the country. The centralization of university activities in the capital has indeed stimulated the development of a strong young urban, political, and social culture, in which the events of the recent history of the country have been woven. Therefore, Tehran is today a plural reality, a space of trade, ideas, and exchanges in which a dialogue of multiple voices is shared between different cultures, especially religious ones. This is possible also thanks to the approach of the diversity that has been constructed after the revolution, in which there is a common consciousness of diversity and belonging. This is possible also through a mutual understanding of the sharing of the same history and cultural heritage with all the ethnic and religious communities of Iran.

¹³⁰ Anne-Sophie Vivier-Muresan, *Communitarian Neighborhoods and Religious Minorities in Iran: A Comparative Analysis*, *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 5 (December 2007): 593-603, esp. 603.

¹³¹ Vivier-Muresan, *Communitarian Neighborhoods* 603.

¹³² Barry, *Re-Ghettoization*, 562.

¹³³ *Ibidem*

¹³⁴ Personal interview, Tehran, November 2019.

As it had been in Oudlajān in the past, modern Tehran is a city of interaction and dialogue between different communities, in which an equal understanding of space, of the sense of identity and the same perception of self and one's otherness emerges, in a sharing and inclusion mechanism. The Jewish community is therefore capable of appropriating, negotiating, and making the best use of the public space of a modern city, now scattered with places and symbols of its own religiosity.

Tehran is a constantly evolving city that has been able to adapt to circumstances, often changing its face. During the last Pahlavi, Tehran was a city without religious spaces, while now it is rich of these buildings. There are churches, mosques and synagogues scattered throughout the city.

Compared to the past, today's Tehran is a city of inclusion. If during the years of the Pahlavi era, it appeared itself as a place of dislocation where diversity was lost, now it is a place of plurality. This corresponds to the government's own need to use diversity as a means of power and stability. Tehran, as in the past, is a city that adapts to the government and lends itself to their game, becoming a symbol of an entire nation.

Conclusions

These pages are the result of an intense research work that aims to give a narrative form to the old Jewish quarter of Tehran. The structure of this work had the intention of highlighting, through a parallel look at various aspects of the main subject, the different situations characterising the two relevant events in the history of the community of Oudlājān: the abandonment of the old quarter and the integration into the urban society of Tehran.

The most important aspect I took in consideration during my research was the reconstruction of the memories and the daily life of the community both inside and outside Oudlājān. The focus was, in general, on three main aspects, like the domestic and daily life of the community, Iranian and Jewish identity and the sense of belonging and the sense of place. Those elements were the common thread that guided the whole project.

The memories that have been reported in these pages are only a small part of the wealth of stories that the old inhabitants of Oudlājān keep in their memory. These memories show that the neighborhood was more than a spatial entity but rather a space for socializing and sharing. Marginality and poverty were conditions that certainly existed in Oudlājān, especially compared to the large, new, and modern neighborhoods of the north of Tehran. These conditions, although existing, were common to all the historic quarters of the south of the capital and were not attributable to the fact that most of the inhabitants of Oudlājān were Jews. Anyway, the marginalization that the Jews suffered in the quarter was tangible and was also observed in the complete negligence of the central authorities towards the neighborhood: the whole history of a community was leaking in the ruined narrow alleys of Oudlājān, in the streets without concrete and in deteriorating houses. Nevertheless, as emerged from the interviews, Oudlājān was more than that: it was the place of alliance, community, family, and it “was everything we would have ever dreamt of as children - a beautiful space to play, a family always together, a sentiment of protection.”¹

Memory, in this regard, takes on a great significance: indeed, through the re-evaluation of the neighborhood, it has been also possible to re-evaluate the history of the community of Oudlājān, on which the traditional historiography about Iran has always been silent. In this regard, memory becomes a necessity in a society characterized by a deep cultural oblivion, like the Iranian one, especially when dealing with Jewish history in the capital.

The Iranian-Jewish identity, studied in its general implications through Iranian history as a vital part of it, is an underexplored field in academic studies. The silence in historiography, as emerged from the words of the scholar Lior Sternfeld, is due to several factors: “the writing of Iranian history from a Zionist

¹ Personal Interview with Asal, November 2019. My translation from Persian.

vantage point, a lack of interest in the history of the Iranian minority in post-revolutionary historiography, and an inability to conceptualize the transregional and global nature of the Iranian Jewish community”². In this context, oral history was essential above all to bridge the gap of the traditional historiography on the analysis of the reality of the Jewish minority in the complexity of Iran's history, and with regard to its social and cultural developments.

The literature shows different historical texts,³ albeit in absolutely limited number, pursuing an exhaustive history of the Iranian-Jewish community in Iran, but lacking the deepness and intimacy that I have tried to give to my research. Studying the Iranian-Jewish history basin through different expressions, such as interviews, gave my research an authentic and privileged perspective on the Iranian-Jewish society, constructing a stimulating trip into the deep meaning of Iranian identity.

When the Iranian-Jewish community is analysed, it is usually from the perspective of a specific area, as for example in the works about the Iranian Jewish diaspora in Los Angeles or in the brilliant book of Alessandra Cecolin, *Iranian Jews in Israel: Between Persian Cultural Identity and Israeli Nationalism*, where, through a socio-political analysis, she examines the two waves of emigration of Iranian-Jews to Israel and the challenges of their integration in Israeli society.

Moreover, the existing scholarship about the Jewish community in Iran has consistently portrayed a socially community that mostly refrained from political activism during the golden age of Mohammad Reza Shah. Little is known about the Jews during the revolutionary period. For instance, the Center of Iranian Jewish Oral History has published numerous scholarly works on the historical Jewish community in Iran, but just few of those articles deal with the period 1977-1979.

With regard to the Iranian identity discourse, which had a central role in my project, most of the scholars trace their works on the dichotomy “Secularism vs Religion”. In this sense the notion of an Iranian identity seems confined to a distant past and unconceivable in the present. Instead, the Iranian identity discourse that emerged from my project finds connections and affinities through the commonly dividing lines represented by religion, ethnicity, and geography.

My research tried to offer a more comprehensive vision of the matter of the Iranian Jewish identity, investigating and analysing the society of the Iranian-Jews in a global vision. Therefore, my work delineated a more exhaustive image of the Iranian-Jewish community as a whole, as well as part of the wider national Iranian culture. Most of all, my aim was to propose an alternative to the development of polarised identifications of Iranian people on the two sides: Muslims and Non-Muslims.

It can be argued that the Jewish experience can be a good model for understanding Iranian identity today: reinforcing the Iranian identity discourse through the Jewish experience can constitute a valid response to the perception of a deep crisis of the Iranian national question and the enhancement of national, economic, and religious alliances, inaugurating a new commonality that will

² Lior Sternfeld, “Jewish-Iranian Identities in the Pahlavi Era”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 3 (2014): 602–5, esp. 602.

³ See: Habib Levy, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran: The Outset of the Diaspora*. Abridged and edited from the Persian by Hooshang Ebrami, translated by George W. Maschke, (Los Angeles, 1999); David Yeroushalmi, *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews*, (Los Angeles: Beit Hatfutsot, 2012); David Yeroushalmi, *The Jews of Iran: Chapters in their History and Cultural Heritage*, (Costa Mesa, CA : Mazda Publishers, 2016).

encourage interrelationships and new balances. The main idea is to visualise a new Iranian commonality. Envisioning this means overcoming the binary opposition that separates the Muslim majority from the religious minorities. In this context, Iranian identity will be read as a result of contacts, confluences, and exchanges, where the elements of belonging prevail over rivalries and antagonisms. And the country Iran will be studied as a point of convergence between these seemingly antipodal cultures.

Writing the history of the Jews of Oudlājān is a task that has been entrusted to me by many and which I hope I was able to honor through these pages.

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