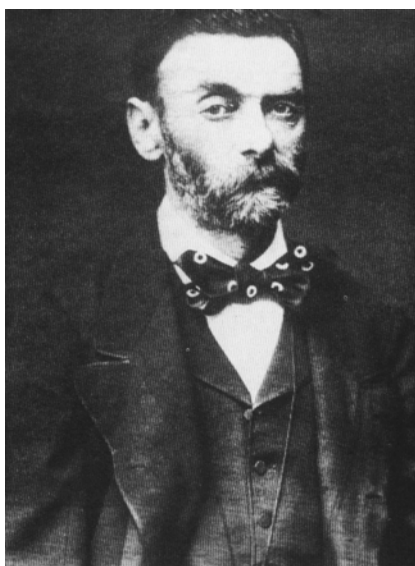

History of Contemporary Medicine in Iran

DR. JACOB EDUARD POLAK (1818 – 1891): THE PIONEER OF MODERN MEDICINE IN IRAN

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Dr. Jacob Eduard Polak (1818 – 1891)

Historically, the second half of the 19th century is the beginning of the process of modernization in Iran. Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir, the chief minister of Naser-ad-Din Shah Qajar, the fourth king of Qajar dynasty (1794 – 1925), was a great reformist who was heavily involved in Iran's modernization. The foundation of Dar-al-Fonun (i.e. the house of techniques) is considered one of the most important efforts of Amir Kabir.¹

Dar-al-Fonun was an institute of technology, which started to function in 1851. It was the first modern higher-educational institution that included

both technical-scientific and military instruction. Most teaching was done by European instructors, with the aid of local translators. Under the Dar-al-Fonun's auspices, various books were translated into Persian; the first Persian modern books were published and some governmental officials received their education.^{2,3}

Prior to the opening of Dar-al-Fonun, Amir Kabir sent a special representative, John Dawud Khan (a German language translator working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran) to Vienna, to hire Austrian teachers and military instructors.^{4,5} Diplomatic and commercial relations between Austria and Iran have a long history, stretching back to the sixteenth century; however, this first Austrian mission to Iran was not an official one still, seven Austrian teachers were employed and each signed a contract to work in Iran for six years.

Among the members of the mission was a physician, Jacob Eduard Polak, who worked to improve medical education and spread knowledge about Iran in Europe. Dr. Jacob Eduard Polak (1818 – 91) was born in the Bohemia region. He came to Tehran on November 24, 1851 and was initially appointed as a teacher of medicine and surgery at Dar-al-Fonun's Medical School. In 1855, following the death of Dr. Ernest Cloquet (1818 – 1855), the former French king's physician, Dr. Polak was elected as the king's physician at the Court of Naser-ad-Din Shah Qajar.^{5-7,9}

Dr. Polak spent nine years in Iran (1851 – 1860); he learned Persian and acquainted himself with Iranian literature and culture. He was able to speak Persian fluently.⁹ He taught medical students at Dar-al-Fonun and many of his pupils subsequently held important positions in modern Iranian medical practice.³ In 1852, the first modern hospital in Tehran, the "State Hospital

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(Marizkhaneh-ye-Dowlati)”, opened. Dr. Polak worked there and was a clinical instructor to Dar-al-Fonun's medical students. He was the first to successfully operate on a bladder stone at that hospital in 1852. He also performed the first autopsy in Iran in 1854 on a European man whose death was medically and legally in question.^{5, 6}

Aside from clinical teaching and performing various surgical operations, Dr. Polak wrote various medical books. He was the author of the first modern anatomy textbook in Iran, which was translated into Persian by his student, Mirza Mohammed-Hossien Afshar. His anatomy textbook quickly became very popular among medical students. Later, his vicegerent at Dar-al-Fonun, Dr. John Schlimmer from Holland, wrote a book in which he acknowledged Dr. Polak's efforts in the areas of medical education and anatomy instruction.

Dr. Polak was an active man. Over a period of nine years in Iran, he traveled to different parts of the country, subsequently writing his observations and memories. His detailed descriptions of Iran and Iranians are both critical and positive. Dr. Polak's travel book was translated into Persian in 1982.⁷ The title of the original version was “Persien, das Land und Seine Bewohner”, which was published in Leipzig, Germany in 1865.

After nine years in Iran, Dr. Polak left, moving back to Austria in 1860, but he returned again in 1882. He went to Hamadan Province in the West of Iran, in order to continue his studies.^{5, 7 – 9} Finally, upon his return to Austria, after a fruitful life, Dr. Polak passed away at the age of 73 on October 8, 1891 in Vienna.⁹ In short, it can be said that he was one of the most prominent and effective European teachers at the Dar-al-Fonun Medical School and that his influence as a pioneer in modern medical education should not be forgotten.

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