

Enduring legacy of soap craftsmanship



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The Sahab Jame' Street is one of the oldest, renowned for its rich history. In the past, it was lined with bustling soap shops and traditional soap makers. In the passage of time, only one small soap store has stood the test of time, preserving its authentic charm. With its quaint ambiance and a wide array of homemade soaps, it continues to enchant visitors, carrying on the legacy of soap craftsmanship.

This shop, with its wooden facade and windows, still carries the scent of tallow and sulfur, just like it did 60 years ago. Baskets filled with various molds for traditional and herbal soaps are neatly arranged on the counter. Organic soaps made with olive oil, ostrich oil, and coconut oil are also available. An old-fashioned balance scale and a perpetually hot kettle and teapot have found their place in another corner of

this old shop.

The owner of this shop, Mohammad Salehi, has preserved his family business with love and passion, alongside his devoted son. His late father, Hajj Yousef Salehi, embarked on his journey in 1953 as a worker within one of these soap-making workshops. In 1962, he courageously established his very own shop, with his son Mohammad as his constant companion. Even after Hajj Yousef's departure from this world in 2001, Mohammad has gracefully shouldered the responsibility of managing the shop, ensuring its continued success.

Mohammad learned the art of soap-making from his father. From a very young age, he would light the fire under the cauldron, or mix the soap ingredients, creating a rich and profitable business.

From the very moment you step into the store, the carefully arranged soaps displaying behind the glass capture your attention. As

you enter, a delightful mix of fragrances, including those of oil, olive, coffee, and cleaning supplies, fills the air, evoking a sense of nostalgia. The atmosphere of the store has remained unchanged, just like stepping back in time, with every item preserved carefully from the 1960s.

Despite market fluctuations and the emergence of competitors with beautiful packaging, Mohammad never abandoned his father's job. Even at the age of 70, true to his father's legacy, he continues to produce soap in a workshop near Varamin. Not only that, but he generously shares his knowledge and skills with interested and aspiring individuals, providing free training.

Speaking in an exclusive interview with Iran Daily, Mohammad Salehi said, "Some people believe that if I rent out my shop, I'll make much more profit than running a soap store that seems outdated. However, I personally have confidence in offering peo-

ple natural and premium products. It's more than enough."

Salehi continued that the shopkeepers on this street are well aware of the soap store's popularity over the past fifty years. Customers, whether from nearby or distant places, would flock to this store, forming long queues to purchase the coveted soap. Moreover, even traveling merchants recognized the demand for these traditional soaps, often showcasing a wide range of soap molds, thereby amplifying their sales.

In this soap shop, an exquisite assortment of soaps is crafted, each serving a unique purpose. From specialized soaps for washing hair and face to the soaps made from olive oil, ostrich oil, coffee and turmeric, in fact there's a perfect soap for every need.

He added that the history of soap entering Iran dates back to the Safavid era, when materials for washing the body and hair were made with clay and ashes. The establishment of the

soap industry in Iran can also be attributed to the trips made by Nassereddin Shah Qajar to Europe and the soaps he brought back as souvenirs for the women of his palace. This led to the construction of the first soap factories and workshops in Tehran and Tabriz.

He noted that in Tehran, soap factories and workshops were established in a neighborhood located close to the Grand Bazaar, which later became known as the Saboonpaz Khaneh (Soap Making House).

The neighborhood emitted the smell of fat and sulfur that could be sensed from several kilometers away. Typically, in their premises such as courtyards and verandas, they would place the molds of the baked soaps next to each other to dry. Over time, this neighborhood became full of shops selling these soaps, one of which was Salehi Shop.

This old soap seller believes that the support of citizens and officials is cru-

cial for preserving a part of Tehran's identity and history.

"Perhaps old-fashioned soaps may not align with the taste of today's public, but paying attention to this business can preserve both history and enhance the

city's attractions," Salehi said.

One of the exquisite treasures of this store is a magnificent large soap mold passed down as part of his sister's dowry. It has gracefully endured the passage of time since 1969.

Polish family's journey into Islamic art and Persian studies

The first encounter of the Polish Czartoryski family with Islamic art may have taken place in 1731 when Prince August Aleksander Czartoryski (1697-1782) married Maria Zofia Sieniawska (1699-1777), heiress of the Sieniawski family estates with its rich Persian collections.

Their son, Prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski (1734-1823), inherited their collection as well as their predilection for art. He and his wife, Princess Izabela Czartoryska, founded the oldest art collection in Poland which was later converted into the Czartoryski Museum and Library in Pulawy.

Adam Kazimierz was also interested in linguistic and etymological studies which prompted him to learn Turkish, Arabic and Persian. To further pursue his efforts in Persian stud-

ies, he established correspondence with the English linguist, encyclopaedist and translator of Hafez, Sir William Jones (1746-1794) — best known for his proposition of a relationship between what later became known as Indo-European languages.

In 1786, Jones sent, among others, an ornate letter in Persian, expressing compliments to Czartoryski and regrets for the distance and impossibility of a personal meeting. These Persian letters were translated for Czartoryski to French by an Albanian resident in Warsaw, Antoni Lukasz Crutta (1727-1814), who worked as translator at the Polish court from 1765.

Czartoryski's fascination with Hafez was augmented by his acquaintance with Karl Emmerich Revczky (1737-1793), an Austrian diplomat of Hungarian de-



The original venue of the Czartoryski Museum
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scent and a noted expert on the Middle East.

In 1771, Revczky published Specimen poeseos Persicae, presenting sam-

ples of the poetry of Hafez — sixteen *ghazals* — in Persian original and in Latin translations. While this pioneering work contribut-

ed to the diffusion of Hafez's poetry in Europe and its popularity in Poland, the friendship between people like Czartoryski, Revczky

and Jones created an intimate network of European intellectuals who shared a devotion to Islamic culture and art.

Among the Persian manuscripts bought by the Czartoryski family during this period is a copy of the *Khamseh* of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi, accompanied by seventeen early Safavid-style paintings.

After the Second Partition of Poland in 1793, Czartoryski became involved in political affairs which left little time for sciences, and it was not until the beginning of the 19th century that he could resume his scholarly pursuits, especially Hafez studies. Now he corresponded in this matter with the French diplomat, archaeologist and literate Marie-Charles-Joseph de Pougens (1755-1833), the British diplomat Robert

Gordon (1791-1847) — who was serving in Austria and Turkey, as well as in Persia from 1810-19 — and the Austrian Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774-1856) who published his own translation of the *Divan* in 1812.

The collecting and scholarly activities on Persia continued to be closely linked with the Czartoryski family during the later parts of the 19th century. Wladyslaw Czartoryski (1828-1894) — the son of Prince Adam Jerzy — followed a step of his ancestors. He integrated the collection and transferred it in 1870 to Krakow. He even increased supplies to buy more manuscripts. His extensive connections enabled him to monitor the latest sales events for Oriental art in London, Paris, Istanbul and Tehran, and to acquire advices from leading specialists.