

History of the KHORASANEE FAMILY by AMEEN KHORASANEE

My father's grandfather was named Hasan Ali he came to settle in Burma from the port of Masulpatam in South India. Masulpatam had in the first half of the 19th century a sizable colony of Iranian expatriates. I was told that in the Shia cemetery at Masulpatam there are many graves with headstones written in Persian as evidence of the Iranian colony it once had.

Hasan Ali Khorasanee went from Rangoon to the town of Prome to do business; the British name of the Burmese town of Pye. He made his headquarters the town of Shmedaung, a small town about 8 miles from Prome. He got married here and had three children, 2 sons and one daughter. The two sons were named Mohamed Backer, my grandfather and Mohamed Mirza, and the daughter was named Sakina.

Hasan Ali Khorasanee accompanied by his two sons used to venture forth for business from Shmedaung, Burma right up to the then town of Bhamo a distance of about 600 miles. Bhamo was close to the Chinese border. It was often attacked by Chinese brigands. There was a Persian merchant in Bhamo at that time and his widow a very old lady told me many years later that once they had to flee from Bhamo during such a raid together with Hasan Ali and his two sons in a boat sailing down to Mandalay.

Hasan Ali Khorasanee during one of his trading trips caught fever in the jungle and died. His two sons buried him. This must have been round about the year 1885 or so. Since my grandfather had many cousins in Burma, it is obvious that Hasan Ali Khorasanee must have had his brother or cousins already settled in Burma or around there after him.

My grandfather, Backer Khorasanee was extremely hard working and had the spirit of a pioneer. He may have left Shmedaung sometime after his father's death and came over to Rangoon. He started selling shoes in Rangoon and was very successful. He later began indenting boots and shoes from England and is said to be the first non-European merchant to do this. There were 3 or 4 Department stores in Rangoon under British ownership.

My grandfather had a shop for selling shoes and he gradually became prosperous. He bought a 3-story house in 31st Street in Rangoon. This was No 8, 31st Street where all my brothers and sisters up to my younger brother Backer were born with the exception of my brother Mehdi who was born in the next street, the 32nd Street in the house of my maternal grandfather Mohamed Kazim Ispahany. This house had 3 apartments on each side, two on each floor with stairs leading up from the extreme left and right side of the house to each of the floors and therefore to each of the apartments on both sides of the house.

My grandfather could speak Persian, Burmese, and Urdu very well. I was told by my grandfather's sister that her father Hasan Ali Khorasanee used to speak broken Urdu and Burmese with a Persian accent. My grandfather had a place on the ground floor where his many Persian friends who had shops in many towns in Burma used to come and stay as his guest when they came over to Rangoon. The old man acted as adviser to these many Persian friends of his and also to those who used to arrive from Iran with the idea of starting life in Burma. The main shops of these merchants in Mongywa, Homalin, Bhamo and other places were good outlets for his shoes and later on for other goods when he began dealing in them.

My grandfather Backer married his cousin whose name was Shereen and was the sister of Mohamed Taki Khorasanee. I was told that this paternal grandmother of mine was extremely fair and had very long reddish hair.

My grandfather had 3 children from this lady, the eldest being my father Hasan Ali, his younger sister Khadija and the youngest Hashim. My uncle Hashim died in Lucknow in the year 1942 or 1943. My paternal grandmother died sometime after the birth of these 3 children and then my grandfather married another cousin of his or a distant cousin of my father named Zahra. Through her he had 5 children.

My grandfather prospered and became well established. He owned 2 properties in Rangoon- one the 31st Street house and another was a village in the outskirts of Rangoon called Myenigon. This village had three streets named Ma Bi Bi Street, Ma Budima Street and Ma Goon Street. The word Ma in Burmese is used in front of the names of ladies and is equivalent to Madam. Ma Bi Bi was after my mother who was known as Bi Bi although her name was Fatima; Ma Budima was after the name of my uncle Hashim's wife Budima. Ma Goon was the Burmese name of the step mother of my father Zahra; she was extremely fair in complexion. And therefore she was called Ma Goon which means Madam Cotton.

My father was named Hasan Ali after his grandfather. Among the community of those of Iranian descent in Rangoon he was considered very learned as he was one of the few people who had gone to college at that time. The Persians of Rangoon somehow did not generally go in for higher education. They wanted their sons to do business.

My grandfather had two horse drawn carriages, one was the gharry type which could seat two persons opposite each other with a full covered roof and shutters which could be lifted or let down. This gharry was used by the ladies of the house. The other type was the phaeton type, the type which can still be seen in Karachi. The phaeton was used by my grandfather every evening to go to the Royal Lakes for outing together with his children and grand children.

My father in those early years bought a car. I think it was called Overland and this was one of the earliest purchases of car in Rangoon. My father due to his education and wide reading was ambitious and he persuaded his father to open a much larger and grand Department store. This Department store was named Backer Khorasanee and it was on one of the main roads of Rangoon. The address was 93 Dalhousie Street.

The largest department was the boots and shoes Department; but there was the tailoring and outfitting department; the general goods department, the watches and clocks department and the shoe repair department; at this time the name of Backer Khorasanee became very widely known not only in Rangoon but throughout Burma where the store catalogues were distributed widely and each item was illustrated and described in English and Burmese. I remember there was a packing section in the department store upstairs where three people were continuously packing goods for dispatch to all towns of Burma on orders received based on the catalogues. The firm was widely advertised in all leading newspapers. My grandfather's business was booming up until after the 1st World War up to 1925, about three years after his death. My father's ambition backfired. He was ordering shoes and other goods, over main line, from England and after the 1st World War all the factories in England were gradually taken over for the manufacturing of ammunition and this source of obtaining supplies stopped. He was calculating that the War would last much longer and so ordered supplies from America which was very costly but still owing to demand we would have done well. But when the war ended in 1918 the British factories began manufacturing goods, which could be imported at cheaper cost. We lost heavily due to having placed very large orders from America and then fortune began declining.

My father many years later again tried to get in touch with his old suppliers and agents in London from Karachi out of sentimental reasons. He did receive some letters from the sons of these suppliers.