FROM VALET TO SQUIRE

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Category: Opinions

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Liz Chater, London UK, 6 January 2016

> *This story is brought to you with the support of the AGBU UK Trust.*

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Albert Abid

I would like to dispel the inaccuracy that Albert Abid was Jewish. Having taken the time to acquire from the National Archives at Kew Albert's naturalisation papers and application to become a British citizen, the sworn affidavit signed by him states he was born in Julfa in Ispahan, Persia. Further evidence that he was Armenian is provided by his will.

Albert Abid, son of an Armenian called Abid Abid and his wife Shapery Satoor, was born in 1848 in Julfa, Persia. Abid senior was a jeweller/goldsmith. Mesrovb Seth in his book *Armenians in India*

claims that Albert Abid's 'real' name was Avietick Satoor Hyrapiet and that he, like other Armenians from India, changed his name '*out of vanity….. to a silly combination of European and Mohammedan names*'. However, I can find no evidence for Seth's suggestion.

With some sort of education behind him, Abid was able to secure positions with a number of British officers in Persia. From 1870 to 1872 he joined several British officers who had embarked on a journey through Persia.

In 1873 Abid was part of the entourage as an interpreter in the Shah's tour of Europe. The tour started in Tehran in April and stopped in more than 20 European cities.

A British newspaper reported: "*The Shah of Persia will be accompanied by his whole Cabinet and by three wives. He has set apart £5,000,000 Sterling for his European journey.*

The Russian Academy Gazette says that the train which is to convey the Shah to St. Petersburg will consist of twelve carriages, one being for baggage, one the kitchen, and a third a dining-room. The Imperial carriage in which the Shah and his grand vizier will travel is to be the seventh in the train, the sixth, immediately preceding it, being occupied by the minister of the Shah's household and by the three princes. The Persian Minister in Russia, with the other Ministers, will travel in the fifth carriage, and in the eighth, or that immediately behind that of the Shah, will travel Prince Menschikoff and other Russian officials. The remaining carriages will be occupied by the physicians, officers and servants of the household. The Shah is now expected to reach St. Petersburg about the 21st or 23rd inst., and he will occupy the apartments on the ground-floor of the Winter Palace, Persian etiquette forbidding his residence in upper rooms. Only sixteen members of his suite can reside under the same roof as their sovereign, and therefore the remainder must be accommodated elsewhere. The Shah's uniform is covered with diamonds and other precious stones valued at two million of Roubles.

After the tour Abid returned to Europe as part of the entourage of Vicar-ul-Umra, a leading nobleman of the Paigah family of Hyderabad. After that trip he entered the service of Mahboub, the Nizam of Hydrabad. It was in Hyderabad that Abid met his wife, Annie Evans.

Abid was already a well-established figure in Hyderabad, as well as being the chamberlain to the Nizam. He had set up a popular shop aimed predominantly at European gentlemen catering to their tailoring needs. Another story suggests that Albert was prone to 'recycling' items that once belonged to the Nizam. She states: "*….socks were another source of illegitimate profit. Mahbub wore only silk ones from France and discarded them after a single wearing. The valet used to collect them, but, as Mahbub's foot was unusually small, even for a man of his delicate build, the socks had little resale value. Undeterred by the limited market, the enterprising valet had them beautifully laundered, re-affixed the paper labels he had preserved from their original appearance, and after a reasonable lapse of time sold them back to his master as a new shipment just arrived from France.*"

Albert and Annie's Children

All their children were born in India, their early years' kindergarten and junior education had been conducted with tutors. Their first child, Gladys Satoor Abid was born in late 1883. Aviet Satoor Abid was born in 1886. Alexander Malcolm Satoor Abid was born in 1889.

Abid had a close friend called Alexander Malcolm Jacob. Alexander was a jeweller and frequently sold precious and highly sought after gems and jewels to the Nizam. For his part, Albert took 10% of each sale from Alexander and in return Albert smoothed access to the palace and the Nizam. This arrangement made Albert a wealthy man and, independent of his position as valet to the Nizam, he set up a shop in Hyderabad supplying everything a European gentleman might require. The Nizam was a regular customer. Annie also set up a shop but aimed at the wives of the European men. The Abids were very quick to observe society's requirements and the Nizam trusted them. In addition to the shops they ran, Albert also built two very large and magnificent houses that were situated near the Palace at Saifabad.

The Imperial Diamond Trial

In 1891 the friendship of Alexander Jacob and Albert became strained, then difficult and ultimately hostile because of a law case between the Nizam and Alexander involving the purchase by Nizam of the Imperial Diamond. The trial made front-page news across India.

There has been discussion about why Albert Abid and Annie left India and settled in Devon. Annie still had family in the South West of England. She also knew Dorset and Devon from her time as governess to the Green family in Sherborne. Albert knew very few people in London.

By June 1894 Albert bought a beautiful property, Dulford House in 147 acres set in the heart of the Devon countryside. It was an eighteenth century white brick house built by the 7th Earl of Montrath. It cost him £50,000, equivalent to just over £5.2 million in today's price.

Within a year of moving in he was making structure changes and additions to the house. He also began to immerse himself into the community and village life. In June 1895 it was reported that "….*the annual feast of the Sick and Benefit Club of this Parish was held in fine weather. The members, headed by the Cullompton Volunteer Band marched first to Dulford House, where Mr. Abid welcomed them kindly, and promised a subscription of £2 to their funds*…" Astutely knowing that as an outsider, he had to work hard to become known as an acceptable member of the local community, a year later he allowed an 'Ambulance Class' to be set up and regularly held at Dulford House.

Whereas Khalidi in his paper indicates that Albert had fallen from grace with the Nizam after the court case and left India permanently, Albert regularly returned to India, although he probably wasn't as welcome by the Nizam as he had been, there was still contact between them. Albert had business interests, as well as his successful thriving 'Abid shop' in Hyderabad that required his regular attention. He also had his ice factory, electric motor and engineering factories. His factories produced thousands of dozens of pure mineral water daily and many tons of ice. Albert also saw a need for pharmacies and established one in Hyderabad and another in Secunderabad, both of which

he staffed with qualified European chemists.

Khalidi quoted a Devon observer that Abid was not welcomed in his new country: "*Despite the wealth and the patronage of local charities, church and the club, all the attributes of someone aspiring to be a Squire, evidently the Abids were not socially accepted. When Albert Abid arrived he sent cards as the gentry did to invite folk to "at home" afternoons. But nobody came to Dulford House*."

Another observer (Superintendent Collins) had the opposite view. He said: "*In returning the accompanying paper I have the honour to report as follows… He is very much respected by the surrounding district, and there is nothing known against his character and respectability. He takes a real interest in the Volunteer movement in his county and a short time ago gave a handsome Challenge Bowl made in India, value £50 to be competed for*."

Albert Abid Shop

Abid was naturalized as British in 1900. While the extended 26-room Dulford House Abid had created as a home was their main residence, he also bought a small town house 48 miles away in Dorchester which he rented out. There is evidence of the secondary property owned by Albert.

1904 was an exciting year for the Abid family. The summer at Dulford House was full of joy and anticipation. Albert and Annie's eldest daughter, Gladys was about to come of age. Local newspapers regaled in the events that Albert had planned to celebrate Gladys' birthday.

In addition to the local gentry, government, military people and senior clergy, list of guests who attended the garden party and the weeks' festivities included Armenians from London: Mr. and Mrs. A. Aganoor, the Misses Aganoor, Mr. and Mrs. Apcar, Mr. and Mrs. Andreas, Mr. and Mrs. J. Balthazar, Mr. and Mrs. J. Balthazar Junr., Mr. J. Balthazar, the Misses Balthazar, Mr. and Mrs. Joakim, Mr. S. Joaquim, Mrs. and the Misses Joaquim, Mr. and Mrs. Sarkies, Mr. and Mrs. T. Sarkies.

Caught up in the euphoria of a week-long celebration of Gladys's birthday the family announced her engagement to Reginald Bartlett of Kent.

Soon after the engagement announcement, Albert and Annie left England for a trip to India. What they didn't know was that their daughter's engagement would not end in a wedding. There is no marriage record for Gladys and Reginald. Gladys went on to marry in 1909 to a local man by the name of de Schmid.

De Schmid altered his name at the time of the great European war and took the name of SPENCE in November 1917. They had a daughter (Barbara Constance de Schmid --later to be known as Spence) in 1911. Barbara married a William Andrews in 1940 and they had two daughters. Gladys died in 1955 in Devon and Eric five years later also in same county.

Alexander Malcolm Abid

He had been educated by private tutors and he then joined Clifton College. Having decided engineering was the career he wanted to follow he was apprenticed at Messrs. W.H. Allen Son & Co Ltd. In August 1909 Alexander returned to Hyderabad where his father appointed him chief engineer at the family firm, Messrs A. Abid & Co. taking charge of the ice plant. Just after his arrival in Hyderabad he turned his hand to something a little more delicate—he invented a toy. His brother Aviet, now a solicitor, arranged for it to be recognized at the patent office.

Alexander had a successful career in Hydrabad building plants and managing a number of Nizam's utility companies. He eventually left and concentrated full time on building up the Abid & Co business started by his father. In September 1917 Alexander married Winifred Devlin. They did not have children but adopted her sister's children, Barney and Kevin. Alex died in the early 1970s and Winifred in the late '70s or the early '80s.

Elizabeth 'Queenie': Betrothed and Jilted

The humiliation Gladys had suffered with her engagement announcement was repeated when her sister Elizabeth "Queenie" was engaged. Elizabeth's engagement to Hugh Swaine de Schmid, brother of Eric de Schmid, was announced with great verve in March 1912. However, after several postponements of the wedding, the marriage was finally cancelled. The bridegroom married someone else in Canada. Queenie never got over it and faded out of public life. Elizabeth was a frequent traveller throughout her life. She did not marry. She died in Nice in 1973 aged 88.

Another Family Wedding

Aviet became a lawyer and worked with John Bartlett, a solicitor in Kent, who was the father of Reginald Bartlett who had briefly been engaged to Aviet's sister Gladys.

An announcement in The Times of the impending marriage of Albert's eldest son, Aviet who was now a well- -established solicitor, to a German woman named Maria Kurz once again filled the family with job. However, it was to be a short-lived happiness. As a British subject in Germany in November 1914, Aviet was interned at a prisoner of war camp near Berlin. He was released a year later.

Aviet returned to his job around 1918. He and his wife Maria had two children both girls, one in 1921 and the second in 1925.

Albert found that during and after WWI attitudes towards him and his family had changed. He suffered unfounded suspicion of being a German sympathizer. Albert felt hurt: he had spent years demonstrating loyalty, his generous actions and community spirit. He was glad to be a British citizen and thought he had been accepted in the parish as a faithful British subject. He paid a high price for his foreign looks and accent, for employing one or two Indian servants and having a broad range of multicultural friends. He and Annie became withdrawn and no longer held parties. Rev. Chalk said "…*the Abids were seldom seen for the remaining years of their life*…"

Anticipating his death, Albert built a family vault in the grounds of Dulford House. Annie died in November 1922.

In his notes, Rev. Chalk described the vault as "*an elaborate eastern-style mausoleum*" and recalls a dark but slightly amusing story. "*…Abid had a habit of visiting the vault from time to time to meditate over Annie's coffin. The garden-staff were warned not to go near that spot on pain of instant dismissal. But there were two Kentisbeare garden-boys and they could not resist the temptation, the more so as their stern employer had not been seen or heard for two days or so. When they drew near the mausoleum, they were startled to hear a knocking from within. They fled for their lives and fortunately reported the matter. For Squire Abid was inside, having been trapped therefore two days by a spring-lock! When he was liberated he was so grateful that he magnanimously forgave them and retained them in his service…*"

His last act of kindness and generosity was not to Devon but to the place where he had been christened, the Armenian Church of Julfa. His will read: "***I devise and bequeath free of duty the picture of the Lord's Supper now in the Dining room at Dulford House aforesaid and the sum of two hundred Pounds to the Armenian Church of Julfa Ispahan in which I was christened. And the sum of one hundred Pounds to my village church at Julfa Ispahan aforesaid….***" His estate was valued at £30,148, at today's values that would be just over £1.5 million.

Dulford House became the property of his son Aviet Abid, but he wanted a clean break from everything and less than two months after his father's death Aviet began clearing the house and offering it for sale.

In November 1927 Aviet changed his name to distance himself from his father's name. The surname he took was Evans--his mother's maiden name. Aviet wasn't successful in selling Dulford House and in the end it was demolished. The mausoleum where his parents were buried was also demolished. The bodies of Albert and Annie were re-buried in St. Andrew's Church, Broadhembury churchyard.

A Abid & Co in Hyderabad traded for nearly 30 years after Albert's death, headed up by Alexander and Winifred Abid Evans. The brothers Alexander and Aviet liquidated the company in the late '40s. Aviet Abid Evans died on the December 29, 1961.

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The full blog can be found at chater-geneology