

## Childhood And Early Education

Ruhullah Musawi Khomeini was born on 20 Jamadi al-Akhir 1320/ 24 September 1902, the anniversary of the birth of Hazrat Fatima, in the small town of Khumayn, some 160 kilometers to the southwest of Qum. He was the child of a family with a long tradition of religious scholarship. His ancestors, descendants of Imam Musa al-Kazim, the seventh Imam of the Ahl al-Bayt, had migrated towards the end of the eighteenth century from their original home in Nishapur to the Lucknow region of northern India.

There they settled in the small town of Kintur and began devoting themselves to the religious instruction and guidance of the region's predominantly Shi'i population. The most celebrated member of the family was Mir Hamid Husayn (d. 1880), author of *'Abaqat al-Anwar fi Imamah al-A'immat al-Athar*, a voluminous work on the topics traditionally disputed by Sunni and Shi'i Muslims. [1](#)

Imam Khomeini's grandfather, Sayyid Ahmad, a contemporary of Mir Hamid Husayn, left Lucknow some time in the middle of the nineteenth century on pilgrimage to the tomb of Hazrat 'Ali in Najaf. [2](#)

While in Najaf, Sayyid Ahmad made the acquaintance of a certain Yusuf Khan, a prominent citizen of Khumayn. Accepting his invitation, he decided to settle in Khumayn to assume responsibility for the religious needs of its citizens and also took Yusuf Khan's daughter in marriage. Although Sayyid Ahmad's links with India were cut by this decision, he continued to be known to his contemporaries as "Hindi," an appellation, which was inherited by his descendants; we see even that Imam Khomeini used "Hindi" as penname in some of his ghazals.[3](#)

Shortly before the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in February 1978, the Shah's regime attempted to use this Indian element in the Imam's family background to depict him as an alien and traitorous element in Iranian society, an attempt that as will be seen backfired on its author. By the time of his death, the date of which is unknown, Sayyid Ahmad had fathered two children: a daughter by the name of Sahiba, and Sayyid Mustafa Hindi, born in 1885, the father of Imam Khomeini.

Sayyid Mustafa began his religious education in Isfahan with Mir Muhammad Taqi Mudarrisi before

continuing his studies in Najaf and Samarra under the guidance of Mirza Hasan Shirazi (d. 1894), the principal authority of the age in Shi'i jurisprudence. This corresponded to a pattern of preliminary study in Iran followed by advanced study in the *'atabat*, the shrine cities of Iraq, which for long remained normative; Imam Khomeini was in fact the first religious leader of prominence whose formation took place entirely in Iran.

In Dhu'l-Hijja 1320/ March 1903, some five months after the Imam's birth, Sayyid Mustafa was attacked and killed while traveling on the road between Khumayn and the neighboring city of Arak. The identity of the assassin immediately became known; it was Ja'far-quli Khan, the cousin of a certain Bahram Khan, one of the richest landowners of the region. The cause of the assassination is, however, difficult to establish with certainty.

According to an account that became standard after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, Sayyid Mustafa had aroused the anger of the local landowners because of his defense of the impoverished peasantry. However, Sayyid Mustafa himself, in addition to the religious functions he fulfilled, was also a farmer of moderate prosperity, and it is possible that he fell victim to one of the disputes over irrigation rights that were common at the time. A third explanation is that Sayyid Mustafa, in his capacity of *shari'a* judge of Khumayn, had punished someone for a public violation of the fast of Ramadan and that the family of the offender then exacted a deadly revenge.<sup>4</sup>

The attempts of Sahiba, Sayyid Mustafa's sister, to have the killer punished in Khumayn proved fruitless, so his widow, Hajar, went to Tehran to appeal for justice, according to one account carrying the infant Ruhullah in her arms. She was followed there by her two elder sons, Murtaza and Nur al-*Din*, and finally, in Rabi' al-Awwal 1323/ May 1925, Ja'far-quli Khan was publicly executed in Tehran on the orders of 'Ayn al-Dawla, the prime minister of the day.

In 1918, the Imam lost both his aunt, Sahiba, who had played a great role in his early upbringing, and his mother, Hajar. Responsibility for the family then devolved on the eldest brother, Sayyid Murtaza (later to be known as Ayatullah Pasandida). The material welfare of the brothers seems to have been ensured by their father's estate, but the insecurity and lawlessness that had cost him his life continued. In addition to the incessant feuds among landowners, Khumayn was plagued by the raids mounted on the town by the Bakhtiyari and Lurr tribesmen whenever they had the chance. Once when a Bakhtiyari chieftain by the name of Rajab 'Ali came raiding, the young Imam was obliged to take up a rifle together with his brothers and defend the family home.

When recounting these events many years later, the Imam remarked, "I have been at war since my childhood."<sup>5</sup> Among the scenes, he witnessed during his youth and that remained in his memory to help shape his later political activity mention may also be made of the arbitrary and oppressive deeds of landowners and provincial governors. Thus, he recalled in later years how a newly arrived governor had arrested and bastinadoed the chief of the merchants' guild of Gulpaygan for no other purpose than the

intimidation of its citizens.[6](#)

Imam Khomeini began his education by memorizing the Qur'an at a maktab operated near his home by a certain Mullah Abu 'l-Qasim; he became a hafiz by the age of seven. He next embarked on the study of Arabic with Shaykh Ja'far, one of his mother's cousins, and took lessons on other subjects first from Mirza Mahmud Iftikhar al-'*Ulama*' and then from his maternal uncle, Hajji Mirza Muhammad Mahdi. His first teacher in logic was Mirza Riza Najafi, his brother-in-law. Finally, among his instructors in Khumayn mention may be made of the Imam's elder brother, Murtaza, who taught him Najm al-*Din* Katib Qazvini's *al-Mutawwal on badi' and ma'ani* and one of the treatises of al-Suyuti on grammar and syntax.

(Although Sayyid Murtaza – who took the surname Pasandida after the law mandating the choice of a surname in 1928 – studied for a while in Isfahan, he never completed the higher levels of religious education; after working for a while in the registrar's office in Khumayn, he moved to Qum where he was to spend the rest of his life).

In 1339/1920–21, Sayyid Murtaza sent the Imam to the city of Arak (or Sultanabad, as it was then known) in order for him to benefit from the more ample educational resources available there. Arak had become an important center of religious learning because of the presence of Ayatullah 'Abd al-Karim Ha'iri (d. 1936), one of the principal scholars of the day. He had arrived there in 1332/1914 at the invitation of the townspeople, and some three hundred students – a relatively large number – attended his lectures at the Mirza Yusuf Khan Madrasa.

It is probable that Imam Khomeini was not yet advanced enough to study directly under Ha'iri; instead, he worked on logic with Shaykh Muhammad Gulpayagani, read the *Sharh al-Lum'a* of Shaykh Zayn al-*Din* al-Amili (d. 996/1558), one of the principal texts of Ja'fari jurisprudence, with Aqa-yi 'Abbas Araki, and continued his study of al-*Mutawwal* with Shaykh Muhammad 'Ali Burujirdi. Roughly a year after the Imam's arrival in Arak, Ha'iri accepted a summons from the *Ulama* of Qum to join them and preside over their activity.

One of the earliest strongholds of Shi'ism in Iran, Qum had traditionally been a major center of religious learning as well as pilgrimage to the shrine of Hazrat-I Ma'suma, a daughter of Imam Musa al-Kazim, but it had been overshadowed for many decades by the shrine cities of Iraq with their superior resources of erudition. The arrival of Ha'iri in Qum not only brought about a revival of its madrasas but also began a process whereby the city became in effect the spiritual capital of Iran, a process that was completed by the political struggle launched there by Imam Khomeini some forty years later.

The Imam followed Ha'iri to Qum after an interval of roughly four months. This move was the first important turning point in his life. It was in Qum that he received all his advanced spiritual and intellectual training, and he was to retain a deep sense of identification with the city throughout the rest of his life. It is possible, indeed, although not in a reductive sense, to describe him as a product of Qum.

In 1980, when addressing a group of visitors from Qum, he declared, “Wherever I may be, I am a citizen of Qum, and take pride in the fact. My heart is always with Qum and its people.”<sup>7</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. See Muhammad Riza Hakimi, Mir Hamid Husayn, Qum, 1362 Sh./1983.
- <sup>2</sup>. However, according to a statement by the Imam’s elder brother, Sayyid Murtaza Pasandida, his point of departure was Kashmir, not Lucknow; see ‘Ali Davani, Nahzat-i Ruhaniyun-I Iran, Tehran, n.d., VI, p. 760).
- <sup>3</sup>. See Divan-I Imam, Tehran, 1372 Sh./1993, p. 50.
- <sup>4</sup>. Interview of the present writer with Hajj Sayyid Ahmad Khomeini, son of the Imam, Tehran, 12 September, 1982.
- <sup>5</sup>. Imam Khomeini, Sahifa-yi Nur, Tehran, 1361 Sh., /1982, X p. 63.
- <sup>6</sup>. Sahifa-yi Nur, XVI, p. 121.
- <sup>7</sup>. Sahifa-yi Nur, XII, p. 51.

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