Isidor Loewenthal 1827-1864

To the Indian sub-continent and beyond



Isidor was born into a Jewish family in the city of Posen in Prussian Poland in 1827. He was the eldest of a family of eight. He went to a Jewish school where he learned Hebrew. Then at the age of 17 he went to a German university. There he enthusiastically embraced liberal political ideas and beliefs. This resulted in him being sought by the police. Evidently he became a political exile fleeing first to Hamburg, then to London and finally to New York where he arrived in the autumn of 1847.

He tried to get work on a farm but he could find no work. He suffered from a spinal disease that resulted in a very short stature so he didn't look capable of physical work. Eventually he invested his remaining small amount of money buying thread, needles, buttons etc. With these in a basket he set out to be a door-to-door salesman. He could speak French and German but knew very little English. Before long he could speak English well and write it with classic style. He had considerable knowledge of English literature. He then moved to Philadelphia.

While on one of his door-to-door selling rounds he called at the home of Rev. Gayley in Wilmington nr. Delaware. The day was cold and wet and he looked a sorry sight! After buying a few goods to help him out, the Gayleys invited him to stay for the night. He stayed with them for some time and Mr Gayley was struck with his linguistic abilities. Later Isidor wrote of this time, **"When I came to your house it was for worldly gain. Little did I think then that I was to receive there what was infinitely better! I began to open the Bible. I was astonished! I waited with eagerness morning and evening for the summons to family worship to hear you pray."**

Mr Gayley found Isidor a post teaching French and German at Lafayette College. While working at the college Isidor attended the Presbyterian Church where Mr Gayley was the minister. His reading of the Bible showed him not only his own spiritual need but the truth of the Lord Jesus as his Saviour. He was baptised and made a public profession of his faith in the Lord Jesus as the true Messiah in the Presbyterian Church he was attending.

In 1852 he entered Princeton Theological Seminary. He was chosen to be the essayist at the Commencement proceedings of the class in which he graduated. The subject for his essay was **India as a field of labour**. He was ordained in 1855. In August 1855 he sailed for India arriving the following November.

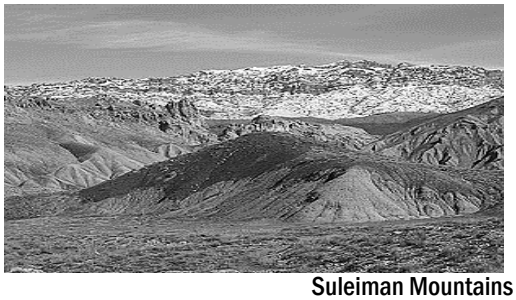
A godly British officer, Capt. H. Conran, who had served in Attak and Peshawar, began to take a deep interest in the spiritual welfare of the Afghans. He gave the Presbyterian Mission $7500 (a huge sum at that time) if they would get involved in the evangelisation of Afghans. So when Isidor arrived, the mission leaders in India thought his great linguistic abilities fitted him for this work. Today about 26 different languages are spoken in Afghanistan.

Isidor spent his first year in Rawalpindi in language study. Towards the end of 1856 the annual meeting of the mission was held. Isidor wrote to the Executive Committee in New York, **"The mission have sent me to Peshawar with a view of penetrating, as soon as ever I can and in whatever way possible, into closed up Afghanistan. I go with great diffidence and trembling hope for the manifest aid of the Lord."**

British officials, both civil and military, felt it to be very unwise to allow any Christian work among Afghans and in fact in all the land west of the Indus. The Commissioner of Peshawar said no Christian worker would cross the Indus River while he was the Commissioner. Shortly after making this statement a tall Afghan appeared at the Commissioner's bungalow in order to present a petition. While the Commissioner was reading the petition the Afghan plunged a knife into his heart.

His successor in the office of Commissioner was Lieut. Herbert Edwards. He was a strong believer who felt that to permit the Gospel to be spread in "the dark places of the earth" would bring

blessing not disaster. At a meeting of British officials (civil and military) in December 1856 the subject of Christian workers had been discussed. Many army officers and officials had wanted the meeting postponed to some future date because it was also the time of local horse races much loved by the British. Governor Edwards said, **"Put off the work of God for a steeplechase? Never!"**



Suleiman Mountains

The meeting was held. One engineering officer, who had been a friend of the murdered commissioner, was strongly opposed declaring that every worker would need a platoon of soldiers to guard him. Shortly after the decision to allow Christian workers was made, this officer transferred to Meerut, north of Delhi, where he and his wife were killed by his own soldiers at the beginning of "The Mutiny".

The first workers to Peshawar were Rev. Karl Pfander, Rev. Robert Clarke and a layman – the army officer Major Martyn who resigned his commission to serve in CMS. Isidor soon joined them. A school for boys was opened with Robert Clarke in charge. Isidor wrote, **"Peshawar is interesting as a sort of Alsace – a borderland between countries – the Gibraltar of the East where you can find Jews and Gentiles, exiled Europeans, refugee Asiatics of all sorts from Bengalis to Afghans, ambassadors from Yarkand, silk dealers from Bokhara, long-haired Baluchis, close-shaven Mongols, adventurers from Herat as well as scholars from Kandahar"**.

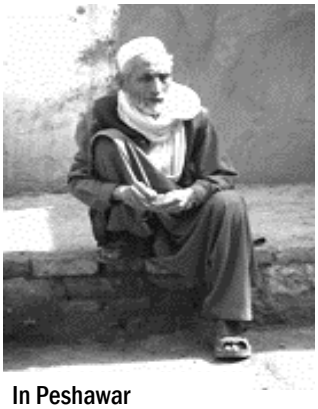
In the evening he loved looking westwards to the wild range of the Suleiman Mountains. Evening after evening he gazed at the sun setting behind the range. He looked at the largely uninhabited precipitous crags standing so distinctly against the beautiful sunsets. He prayed that one day the Gospel would be carried across knowing that beyond the Khyber Pass lay the vast cradle of nations westwards to Persia and the Arab World, north and north-west up to the Czarist Russian border and on to the vast areas of Central Asia. He longed to be the first to announce the glad tidings of salvation through Jesus Christ.

But sickness and exhaustion caused him to feel his own weakness more keenly day by day. But still there was a strong voice within him crying, ***"Prepare ye the way of the Lord!"***

The "Indian Mutiny" began in 1857. Isidor stayed in Peshawar. That summer he wrote, **"Things outwardly seem to go on as usual, but everyone is aware that they are potentially standing on a mine and that the train is laid! I am, however, perfectly calm and without fear and feel content and happy."**
During this time of tension he worked hard on learning Dari (Afghan colloquial Farsi) and continued to improve his Pushtu.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Dr. Leyden, Professor of Hindustani in the College of Fort William in Calcutta, made a first attempt to produce a Pushtu translation of the Scriptures. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark in Pushtu were completed in 1811. After Dr. Leyden's death the following year, the translation continued under the supervision of the Serampore Centre, set up by William Carey, using the scribe employed by Dr. Leyden. The entire New Testament was printed in Serampore in 1818.

A few copies of this edition found their way into European libraries and some doubtless reached Afghanistan through the Afghan merchants who carried the fruits of Kabul as far as Calcutta. When Lieut. Herbert Edwards was sent by the British Government to the Bannu District in 1848 he found a copy of this New Testament in Pushtu in the hands of an Afghan. It had been given to him at Hardwar when, as a boy, he had accompanied his relatives to the great fair held at this place. They had told him to take great care of the Book and neither fling it into the river or the fire, but preserve it until the day when the British should be rulers of his country. The man had kept the book wrapped in many folds of cloth and perhaps had never read a page of the sacred volume or allowed anyone else to do so.



In Peshawar

When the Presbyterian Church began work in Ludhiana in 1834 copies of the Serampore Pushtu version of the New Testament were given to Afghans found there, many of whom had accompanied their King, Shah Shujah, to that place. By the time Isidor went to Peshawar very few copies of this early edition existed. After careful examination, it was decided not to reprint this version but instead to prepare a new translation.

Isidor immediately joined this effort. Progress was slow, but diligent Isidor was not discouraged or faint of heart for he saw no prospect yet of getting into Afghanistan. He wrote, **"Though at this moment Afghanistan seems closed, events which may take the most sagacious statesman and diplomatists by surprise, may furnish the key and suddenly the gates may burst open. At that moment let the church be ready to go in and possess. Though, like Achaean warriors, we may have been lying for ten years before the 'impregnable city', every moment of that time may have been needed to fit us for the final conquest. Businessmen, development workers and others will be ready to offer this people their civilisation, but what is civilisation without the Gospel?"**

As the years went by Isidor had more and more contact with Afghans. Anxious though he was for such contact, he didn't want them to interfere unduly with his one great pursuit of translating the Scriptures into Pushtu. He wrote, **"The Afghans are the greatest idlers and waste many a day for me."** He had many enquirers but he found many to have personal motives and they didn't proceed with their enquiries when they realised the cost of becoming a disciple of the Lord Jesus.

Isidor itinerated widely in the border areas during the cold weather. **"I am pretty well known to many of the educated. So soon as my presence is known, respectable khans, learned mullahs, zealous imams and other cleanly-dressed, large-turbaned Afghans crowd into my little tent and I dispute with them all day long. I distribute the Gospels in Pushtu and make the truth is known to many."**

In 1862 he wrote to a friend in New York, **"I hope you will receive early next year three copies of the completed Pushtu New Testament."** At last the New Testament had been completed!



Afghan Border with British India

In April 1864 Isidor was in his study. He was deeply engrossed in his books. Time passed unheeded. As he walked out into the cool of the early evening air there was no thought of any danger. Suddenly there was the sound of a pistol shot. Isidor dropped to the ground with a bullet through his forehead. He had been shot by his own chaukedar. It has never been clear if this was a deliberate attack or if he was mistaken for a burglar. At the time the chaukedar was given the benefit of the doubt.

Isidor spent only seven years in Peshawar. In his brief time he became a master of Pushtu. He translated the whole of the New Testament and sent it to press. He very nearly finished a Pushtu dictionary as well as parts of the Old Testament. He could preach fluently in Pushtu, Farsi/Dari, Hindustani, Urdu and Arabic. It is said that no foreigner at that time in India had so thorough a knowledge of Asian literature, such an understanding of the various cultures of the people he met or such a thorough understanding of Islam.

He had extensive correspondence with people in America and Europe. He was a valued contributor to American and British quarterly journals. Above all he was sincere, humble, devoted and very zealous for the glory of the Lord Jesus.



Grave of Isidor Loewenthal

Isidor's body lies in the beautiful British cemetery in Peshawar looking out over the valley to the hills of the west that he longed to penetrate. Fellow workers put the following memorial on his gravestone:

To the memory of Isidor Loewenthal – missionary of the American Presbyterian Mission who translated the New Testament into Pushtu and was shot by his chaukedar on April 27, 1864.

"I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth." Rom. 1:16

He would have rejoiced to see our day! Perhaps we will never know why he was held back from entering Afghanistan with the Gospel.

Let us remember the prayer of the Moravians:

"Keep them open. Keep our doors open among the nations. And open those that are as yet shut!"

