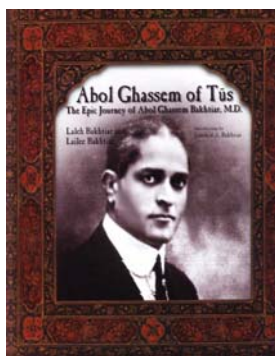

Book Review

THE BIOGRAPHY OF DR. ABOL GHASSEM BAKHTIAR (1872 – 1971)

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"At nineteen, I was a peddler in the Bakhtiyari Mountains with thousands of hallucinating dreams. I had one guideline and that was my desire-my desire for an education and for betterment. At the age of forty-four, when I came to America, I had only a high school diploma from the American High School in Tehran. No money! No relatives! No one to back me up! But I was determined to study medicine. No one on the earth could divert me from my path. When I first met the Dean of Columbia College for admission to the college, he said I had chosen a very hard subject and I should change it. I told him that death or success was my aim and I would not change my subject even if I spent all my life trying to achieve it." (Quoted from a letter written by Dr. Abol Ghassem Bakhtiar addressed to his son, September 26, 1953).¹

In recent years, various papers and books have been published in Iran or abroad on the contemporary history of Iranian medicine, including biographies of some

outstanding Persian physicians. One example is a book in English, entitled "Abol Ghassem of Tus, the Epic Journey of Abol Ghassem Bakhtiar, MD." This 336-page book contains the interesting life story of a strong-minded and diligent physician. Dr. Bakhtiar (1872 – 1971) completed his medical training at Syracuse University in America, at the age of 55. He was a model of hard work, endurance and perseverance. Dr. Bakhtiar returned to Iran in 1931 as a surgeon. He practiced medicine up to the age of ninety, working seven days a week and 12 hours per day.¹

The authors of the book are three of his children: Dr. Laleh (PhD of psychotherapy), Dr. Lailee (gastroenterologist), and Dr. Jamshid Bakhtiar (psychiatrist). They dedicated the book to the memory of their father. The book describes the biography of the late Dr. Bakhtiar as well as the history of contemporary Iran at the end of the Qajar dynasty and during Pahlavis' era, especially focusing on the Bakhtiyari Nomad's social life and customs. It also contains translations of many Persian verses of the great poets and beautiful Iranian miniature paintings, as well as some historical photographs.

Based on the story that is narrated by the authors, Dr. Bakhtiar was born in Borujen in the Province of Chahar Mahal in 1872. He attended traditional school (called, in Persian, Maktab Khaneh) from the ages of five to ten years.¹

He experienced different jobs and responsibilities. He was a peddler, later on a shopkeeper, and then a tutor; however, when he moved to Tehran to continue his education, he became a student. He was accepted as a student at the "American High School" (later it was called Alborz), when he was a middle-aged man. Only one of strong character could win such a battle and Abol Ghassem had that character, so, he won. When he was graduated from the high school, it

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Figure 1. Dr. Bakhtiar at the age 98, 1970.¹

did not satisfy him because he was interested in medicine since his early childhood after struggle with smallpox. Dr. “Samuel Martin Jordan”, the director of the high school encouraged and helped him his way to America. Abol Ghassem left Iran on August 29, 1919 and he arrived in Ellis Island in New York City on October. Then he initially was enrolled at Columbia University and subsequently completed his academic study at Iowa and South Dakota universities and in 1923, he received his BA degree and entered the “Syracuse Medical School” in 1925 at the age of 51. Finally, after the internship course, he started his residency program of the surgery at the “Bellevue Hospital” in New York. When he finished his medical training, after marriage, he eventually returned to Iran in 1931.¹

Dr. Issa Seddigh (1894 – 1980), the pioneer of modern higher education in Iran, pointed out in his memory book (Yadgar-e Omer) that he met Dr. Bakhtiar in America and encouraged him to come back to Iran to practice medicine.²⁻⁴ Upon his return home, he founded a private hospital in Tehran, where he performed different surgical operations. Then, he was appointed as the Vice-Chancellor of Tehran Medical School from 1934 – 1935 and as teaching staff at the School between 1933 – 1937. During this period, he taught the topics of the obstetrics and gynecology and minor surgery to students of medicine. Another major contributions of Dr. Bakhtiar to the Tehran Medical Faculty dates back to 1934. At that time, an American physician, Dr. Edward Beller, was

working at the American Hospital in Tehran, and was employed as the anatomy instructor at the Medical School. He was also responsible to equip the Anatomy Hall and to provide the human cadavers needed for dissection by the medical students. To achieve his goal, Dr. Bakhtiar as the Vice-Chancellor of the Tehran Medical School supported him and was very effective in the planning and building of the Anatomy Hall.⁵

After his accomplishments at Tehran University Medical School, in 1940, Dr. Bakhtiar went to Abadan in the Khuzestan Province in the South of Iran, and worked as the chief surgeon at the hospital affiliated to the “Oil Company”. He then moved to another city in Khuzestan Province, Masjed-e Solyman, in 1942. He came back to Tehran in 1962 at the age of about 90. For his medical and educational services, the President of Tehran University honored him in 1964 in an official ceremony and one of the anatomical halls at Tehran Medical School was named after Dr. Bakhtiar.⁶

Eventually, after nearly a century of hard work and a fruitful life (Figure 1), Dr. Abol Ghassem Bakhtiar passed away on January 1971 in Tehran, at the age 99, due to a heart attack. He was buried next to the tomb of Ferdowsi (the great Persian epic poet) in Tus, near Mashhad, in North-West of Iran.¹ Dr. Bakhtiar loved life, believed in goodness, and was engaged in a lifelong struggle to obtain knowledge. He is a worthy model to serve as an example for younger generations.

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