

The Fourth Symposium on Iranian Studies in Vienna; Examining the Life, Works, and Legacy of Robert Adam Pollak

The Fourth Symposium on Iranian Studies, entitled “Professor Robert Adam Pollak: Life, Works, and Legacy,” was held on the evening of Friday, 14 August 2026, under the auspices of the Iranian Wisdom House in Vienna, Austria,

The symposium took place from 17:00 to 18:30 at the House of Iranian Wisdom and was dedicated to examining various dimensions of the life, scholarly and literary activities, and legacy of Robert Adam Pollak, the Austrian jurist, man of letters, and researcher in the field of Iranian studies.

In this program, Professor Dr. Robert A. Patzner, grandson of Robert Adam Pollak and Austrian biologist; Dr. Nosratollah Rastegar, former deputy director of the Institute of Iranian Studies of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and former lecturer at the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the University of Vienna; and Dr. Reza Gholami, professor of political philosophy, cultural and civilizational studies, and Cultural Counselor of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Austria, delivered addresses.

Robert Adam Pollak: From Law and Literature to Oriental Studies and the Shahnameh

The first speaker of the symposium was Professor Dr. Robert A. Patzner, grandson of Robert Adam Pollak, who, speaking in German, presented a portrait of his grandfather’s personal life, family background, professional activities, and literary and Orientalist interests.

At the beginning of his remarks, Patzner referred to his personal relationship with his grandfather, noting that because of his young age at the time of Pollak’s death, he had not known him closely. He nevertheless pointed to the daily diaries that Pollak had kept regularly and meticulously from 1897 to 1951. According to him, these notes not only record the events of Pollak’s personal life but also provide valuable information about literary and artistic events as well as the cultural and social atmosphere of Vienna in that period; they are now preserved in the Austrian National Library.

He then turned to Pollak’s family background, stating that Robert Adam Pollak was born on 20 April 1877 in Vienna. His father had established a well-known furniture factory in Vienna whose activities continued for decades afterward.

Pollak studied law at the University of Vienna and subsequently worked for many years in the judiciary, eventually rising to the rank of vice-president of the Commercial Court of Vienna. Patzner also referred to the difficult conditions of the Nazi era, noting that in 1938, following the implementation of the Nazi racial laws and the Nuremberg Laws, Pollak was forced into retirement. Nevertheless, owing to family circumstances and the fact that his wife was not Jewish, he was able to remain in Vienna and weather that difficult period. After the end of the Second World War, he returned once more to legal practice.

Friendship with Literary Figures and a Love of Books

Patzner went on to speak of his grandfather's deep interest in literature and books. According to him, Pollak did not use his family name for his literary activities and published his literary works under the name "Robert Adam."

He also referred to Pollak's friendly relations with a number of prominent cultural and literary figures of his time, including Arthur Schnitzler and Karl Kraus.

Another characteristic that Patzner mentioned about his grandfather was his great love of books. According to him, Pollak's apartment was filled with books, and he possessed one of the large private book collections in Vienna.

Interest in Oriental Studies and the Translation of the *Shahnameh*

An important part of Patzner's address was devoted to Pollak's interest in Oriental studies and Islamic and Iranian studies.

He explained that Pollak had been interested in Oriental studies since his student days, had attended classes related to the Qur'an, and had even translated some Qur'anic verses into German.

His most important achievement in this field, however, was his extensive work on translating Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* into German. According to Patzner, Pollak carried out this translation between 1948 and 1952.

Referring to the technical difficulties of the work in that period, he said that his grandfather had personally typed this extensive translation on a typewriter and, because of the scarcity of typewriter ribbon, had used carbon paper to produce multiple copies of the pages.

Patzner's address presented a picture of a personality whose professional life in law and the judiciary, alongside his deep interest in literature, books, and Oriental studies, ultimately culminated in one of his most important literary projects: the translation of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* into German.

Dr. Nosratollah Rastegar: The *Shahnameh*, Friedrich Rückert's Translation, and the Place of Iranian Studies in Austria

The second speaker of the symposium was Dr. Nosratollah Rastegar, former deputy director of the Institute of Iranian Studies of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and former lecturer at the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the University of Vienna, who delivered his remarks in German and devoted a substantial portion of his address to introducing the *Shahnameh*, its German translations, and the importance of this work in transmitting Iranian culture to the German-speaking world.

At the beginning of his remarks, Dr. Rastegar, while thanking the organizers, referred to his long involvement in research related to the *Shahnameh* and stated that he had devoted approximately thirty to forty years of his scholarly life to projects connected with the *Shahnameh*.

He then referred to a typewritten version of a German translation of the *Shahnameh*, the examination of which had been an astonishing experience for him. According to Rastegar, the outstanding feature of this translation is its poetic and verse form, while at the same time avoiding complex and dry academic language, so that a general audience can also relate to it.

Friedrich Rückert's Translation: A Poetic Recreation of the Shahnameh

Dr. Rastegar then introduced the translator of this work, explaining that the translation belongs to Friedrich Rückert, the outstanding German poet and Orientalist of the nineteenth century.

According to him, Rückert, with his deep mastery of the Persian language and literature, had been able to translate extensive portions of the *Shahnameh* into German and, in doing so, had sought to recreate the meter and epic tone of Ferdowsi's work in the target language as well.

Rastegar regarded this feature as highly important from a translation-studies perspective, because transferring a verse epic text while preserving its meter, music, and literary atmosphere from Persian into German is a difficult and rare undertaking.

He also spoke about his own efforts to prepare this work for publication, stating that he had spent a long time examining, correcting, and editing the old manuscripts of Rückert's translation.

One of the difficulties of this work was how to transliterate and record authentic Iranian names in German. Eventually these efforts, in collaboration with a publisher, bore fruit, and the translation was published in a multi-volume set.

The Shahnameh: Beyond the "Book of Kings"

Another part of Dr. Rastegar's remarks was devoted to explaining the content of the *Shahnameh* and its place in Iranian culture.

He emphasized that the *Shahnameh* should not be regarded merely as the "Book of Kings." In his view, this work presents a broad picture of Iranian identity, ethics, human values, peace-loving spirit, and the way of life of Iranian society.

According to Rastegar, the *Shahnameh* is not solely a narrative of the lives of kings and their wars; rather, one can also observe in it reflections of the lives and mentalities of various social groups—from artists and craftsmen to heroes and champions.

With this explanation, he regarded the *Shahnameh* as a work of broad historical, cultural, social, and human dimensions, knowledge of which can contribute to a deeper understanding of Iranian culture and civilization.

The Historical and Content Structure of the Shahnameh

For his German-speaking audience, Rastegar divided the *Shahnameh* into three main periods: the mythical period, the heroic period, and the historical period.

According to him, the mythical section includes the early kings and narratives concerning the emergence of the human world, civilization, and society; the heroic section focuses on heroes, champions, and epic battles; and the historical section begins with the period of Alexander and continues until the late Sasanian period and the Arab invasion of Iran in the seventh century CE.

He also recalled that in shaping this vast work Ferdowsi had drawn upon ancient written sources as well as oral and traditional narratives passed down from generation to generation.

The Place of Women in the Shahnameh

One of the noteworthy sections of Dr. Rastegar's address was an examination of the place and role of women in the *Shahnameh*.

Referring to certain stereotypical perceptions of Eastern societies, he emphasized that women in the *Shahnameh* are not merely marginal figures confined to the domestic sphere; rather, they are present in various social and political arenas.

According to him, women in the *Shahnameh* can appear as kings, artistic figures, wise counselors, and even on the battlefield, and in many narratives they play active and decisive roles.

Concern about the Future of Iranian Studies in Austria

In another part of his remarks, Dr. Rastegar addressed, in a critical tone, the state of Iranian studies at Austrian universities, particularly in Vienna.

Referring to his own background, he said that he had been the sole lecturer in this field for about twenty-five years and expressed regret that after the end of his activity, Iranian studies in the academic environment of Austria had suffered neglect and its place in the university structure had been weakened.

This part of his remarks emphasized the necessity of renewed attention to Iranian studies at Austrian universities and of preserving this field as one of the important disciplines in the study of the East and the civilizations of the world.

Dr. Rastegar concluded by thanking the audience for their attention and ended his remarks; thereafter the program moved into an artistic section, and a video clip and a piece of traditional Iranian music were presented to those present.

Dr. Reza Gholami: "Ferdowsi and the Intercultural Approach"

The third address of the symposium was delivered by Dr. Reza Gholami, professor of political philosophy, cultural and civilizational studies, and Cultural Counselor of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Austria, under the title “Ferdowsi and the Intercultural Approach.”

At the beginning of his remarks, Dr. Gholami emphasized that he did not intend to deal with the common readings of Ferdowsi and nationalism; rather, he wished to examine another capacity of the *Shahnameh*—namely, its capacity for intercultural dialogue, recognition of the other, and crossing ethnic and cultural boundaries.

He distinguished between “multiculturalism” and “interculturalism,” explaining that interculturalism goes beyond the coexistence of cultures and emphasizes active dialogue, mutual influence among cultures, recognition of the other as an equal subject, and the overcoming of cultural and ethnic self-centeredness.

Wisdom: The Common Language of Cultures

One of the main axes of Dr. Gholami’s address was the concept of wisdom (*kherad*) in the *Shahnameh*. He stated that any intercultural dialogue requires a shared horizon, and that in Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* this shared horizon can be found in the concept of wisdom.

According to him, wisdom in the *Shahnameh* is not limited by geographical and ethnic boundaries and becomes the criterion for evaluating human beings—whether they are Iranian, Turanian, Indian, or Roman.

Referring to the character of Piran-e Viseh, he explained that Ferdowsi, even among Turanian figures, when confronted with a wise and ethical human being, places him in a high position; by contrast, an Iranian king such as Kay Kavus is criticized by Ferdowsi when he distances himself from wisdom.

Going Beyond the Duality of “Us and the Other”

Another part of the address was devoted to a critique of the simple division of human beings into “us” and “others.”

Examining various stories of the *Shahnameh*, Dr. Gholami stated that in this work good and evil are not absolutely divided between two peoples or two lands. In his words, the principal enemy of human beings in the *Shahnameh* is not so much a people or a nation as greed, pride, ignorance, and lack of wisdom—qualities that can appear in any society and in any ruler or human being.

He also referred to the story of Iraj and the preference for peace and human life over power, territory, and political glory, regarding this narrative as an example of the priority of human values over ethnic and political rivalries.

Zal and Rudabeh: The Victory of Dialogue over Prejudice

Among the other important axes of the address was an examination of the story of Zal and Rudabeh.

Dr. Gholami regarded this story as one of the outstanding examples of intercultural capacity in classical literature and stated that opposition to this union was initially based on Rudabeh's family and historical background and past enmities; yet Zal, through reasoning, dialogue, and emphasis on the inner values of the human being, seeks to change this outlook.

He added that from this perspective, the formation of the bond between Zal and Rudabeh and the birth of Rostam can be seen as an example of overcoming ethnic and historical prejudices and of the victory of dialogue over intolerance.

Siyavashgerd: Symbol of an Intercultural City

In another part of his remarks, Dr. Gholami examined the story of Siyavash and the building of Siyavashgerd in Turan from the perspective of intercultural philosophy.

According to him, after entering Turan, Siyavash neither abandons his previous identity nor rejects the culture of the new land. By marrying the daughter of Afrasiab and building a city in the land of Turan, he creates a kind of cultural and civilizational synthesis.

From this perspective, Dr. Gholami regarded Siyavashgerd as a symbol of an "intercultural city"—a city in which Iranian elements take shape in Turanian territory with the participation of the people of that land.

He also examined the tragedy of Siyavash within this framework, regarding it as an example of the destruction of an intercultural bridge as a result of prejudice, extremism, and the politics of eliminating the other.

Humanism and Universal Ethics

Another part of the address was devoted to components such as benevolence, justice, generosity, assistance to the deprived, opposition to oppression, and the preservation of human dignity in the *Shahnameh*.

Referring to Ferdowsi's recommendations regarding support for the poor and vulnerable, Dr. Gholami stated that the ethics of the *Shahnameh* can be studied beyond ethnic and geographical boundaries.

He emphasized that Ferdowsi's attention to deprived human beings and those who are in economically or socially vulnerable positions shows that human dignity and social responsibility occupy an important place in the ethical world of the *Shahnameh* alongside concepts of power and heroism.

The Shahnameh: A National Epic and at the Same Time Interculturally Readable

In the concluding part of his remarks, Dr. Gholami emphasized the necessity of maintaining balance in the interpretation of the *Shahnameh* and stated that the *Shahnameh* is undoubtedly a national epic and that distinctions between Iran and Aniran exist within it; therefore this aspect of the work cannot be ignored.

Nevertheless, in his view, this distinction does not mean an absolute division of the world into “good Iranians” and “bad non-Iranians.” In the *Shahnameh* it is possible for someone from the other side of this boundary to be wise, loyal, generous, and honorable, while an Iranian king may be ignorant, oppressive, or caught in greed and pride.

He regarded this feature as one of the most important grounds for the possibility of an intercultural reading of the *Shahnameh*—a reading that, while remaining faithful to the structure and content of the text, also refrains from imposing a one-sided and contemporary interpretation upon it.

The Shahnameh: An Invitation to Understanding among Cultures

In summarizing his remarks, Dr. Gholami stated that if intercultural thought is understood as seeing the world from the perspective of the other, engaging in critical dialogue with him or her, and seeking a shared truth beyond the boundaries of blood, lineage, and geography, then the *Shahnameh* can be regarded as one of the important literary works for reflection on the possibility of mutual understanding among human beings and cultures.

He emphasized that the *Shahnameh* does not speak only of Iran’s past; it can also, in today’s world, inspire dialogue about coexistence, human dignity, peace, and mutual recognition among cultures.

Dr. Gholami concluded his remarks with this summary:

“Wisdom has no ethnic boundary; human dignity has no geographical boundary; and dialogue can build a bridge where prejudice builds a wall.”

A Step on the Path of Dialogue between Iran and Europe

At this symposium the subject of planning for a reading of Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* was also raised—a project that can, in due course, provide a basis for a broader introduction of the *Shahnameh* and Persian literature to German-speaking audiences and for strengthening cultural dialogue between Iran and Austria.

The Fourth Symposium on Iranian Studies at the House of Iranian Wisdom in Vienna, focusing on the life and works of Robert Adam Pollak and its connection with the legacy of Ferdowsi, provided an opportunity for Iranian studies, *Shahnameh* scholarship, and intercultural dialogue to be considered alongside one another.

This event also demonstrated that the legacy of Iranianists such as Pollak is not merely a part of the history of Iranian studies in Europe, but can continue to serve as a foundation for fresh dialogues about language, literature, identity, culture, and the relations among civilizations.

At the end of the program, those present continued their scholarly and cultural conversations in a warm atmosphere.