

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

May 1st, 1992

Dear Peter,

The following report takes the edited form of the diary I kept during my recent, whirl-wind trip through Iran.

It was a quick trip--far too quick--but I would like to think that it helped put together some additional pieces of the putative 'rivarly' between Turkey and the Islamic Republic for the hearts and minds of Azerbaijan and the other Turkic/Muslim republics of Central Asia.

It also, almost incidentally, served as a basic introduction to the complex society that is the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Most people catch their breath at the mention of that country, but I must say at the outset of this epistle that it was a fine trip and I had a fabulous time.

But before launching into the running notes, I think a few words of explanation are in order.

First and foremost, I have to stress that this is not a report on Iran. I had neither the time nor the background to pretend to accomplish such a mission.

I was only given a visa for one week (which I managed to extend to two); I speak only infantile Persian (which I mean to correct) and I was officially only a tourist (and thus unable to conduct interviews with officials save on the sly).

The narrow focus, though, suited me just fine: I was spared the obligation to wait in ante-chambers and ask obvious journalistic questions like:

Do you still support terrorism? and Do you think that the nature of the Islamic Revolution will be affected by liberals?

No, I was a tourist--but one with a twist: I was, to my knowledge, the first American tourist to visit Iran in a decade--but one whose language of communication was Azeri Turkish.

It was a very strange combination and no doubt limiting--and I think it fair to warn you right now that this unconventional approach will no doubt invite howls of protest from the expert Iran-watchers (both -philes and -phobes) who read this.

They will say something like:

You Have The Hubris To Talk About Iran When You Don't Have Farsi And You Were Only There For Two Weeks?

After bowing my head in shame and admitting that this is true, I will ask them:

When was the last time you walked the streets of Tehran or Tabriz speaking Azeri? When was the last time you were in Iran?

But I was not trying to capsulize all of Iran.

Making a virtue out of lingual neccesity, I was only really interested in the Azeris.

The rest was icing on the cake.

Here goes.

Thomas Goltz is an ICWA fellow studying the Turkic-speaking republics of the former USSR, with an emphasis on Azerbaijan

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.



Goltz In Front Of The American Embassy In Tehran

tcq-23

21.4.1992 (Baku/Tehran)

Lift off.

The Aeroflot jet is nearly empty.

There are 60 odd regular seats plus ten first class lounge chairs, and we are only 23 people: a quick passport check at Azeri customs suggests that in addition to myself and a group of four Slav diplomats, the other passengers are evenly divided between Iranian nationals and Azeris.

They paid the equivalent of around \$40 for their tickets.

I paid the 'international' rate of \$156.

Happily, AzAl (Azeri Aeroflot) takes plastic.

After an easy flight of just over an hour, we cross the snow-dusted Elburz mountain range that separates the Caspian littoral from the Iranian plateau, and touch down at Tehran's Mehrabad airport.

The planes taxis and stops.

We are definitely in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The ladies aboard the plane now tie the Hijab, or the minimal Islamic headdress for women, over their heads to cover their hair and pull on the Manto, or minimal Islamic streetware to cover whatever they are wearing beneath it. None put on the chador, or complete black cover-all.

A VIP vehicle with a welcoming committee aboard roars up to pick up the obscure Slavs, who are now clearly identified as official people.

Another airport bus pulls up to pick up the rest of us, and I step aboard to be whisked toward customs.

Now come the obvious, idiotic questions.

What next?

What exception will be afforded the American, me?

I have a visa, it is true, but one obtained almost on the sly: at a press conference in Baku with Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, I asked for permission to visit Iran, and he said Ok. It was more complicated than that, of course, but when I applied at the Iranian embassy down the street from my house in Baku, a month or more after my brief meeting with Velayati, that is what I said: Your foreign minister invited me to come to Iran.

They resisted; I insisted. Confused, they finally punched a stamp in my passport.

Now I am here, and don't know what is to happen next.

Arrested on false pretenses?

Wined and dined (as it were) by the Islamic elite?

The reception at the steps of the plane, alas, is not for me, but the Russians.

I join the other passengers in a regular airport bus.

We arrive at the terminal.

The airport is empty, and clean.

Spic and span compared with that in Baku.

At the passport desk, I line up with Iranians, Azeris and a Belorussian engineer who speaks nothing but Belorus and Rus. I help him out, and we are both quickly processed through.

The somebody notices my passport is not Soviet (or CIS).

American?

I gulp.

The passport man does a quick, perfunctory check through a file at his side that I presume to be a list of known persona non grata types.

Sagol, he says in Turkish, Thanks. I am stamped through with a smile.

America, he says to another official standing nearby, and the other man also smiles.

I am in country, as they say, and the rest of the processing is equally rapid. I stop at the bank and change \$100. The Azeri bank clerk uses a computer and electronic bill counter.

I go to customs and a man asks me to open my bags.

He speaks Azeri, too.

Any videos or cassettes he asks, looking at a video and several music cassettes.

Only these, I say, prepared to have them seized.

I had forgotten about the prohibition against 'decadent' music in Iran and for one wild minute, I imagine that the video I am carrying from a friend to a relative might be porno.

Idiot, I say to myself.

From where? the customs man asks of me.

America, I say.

America...he kind of growls, and then waves me through without bothering anymore about the cassettes or video.

I pick up my bags and am flagged through sliding glass doors by two more officials in uniforms that look different from those of the the passport checkers and the customs' men. Suddenly I am in the reception area of the airport, where relatives are embracing and people taking pictures of the new arrivals.

I am through, in Iran.

The entire procedure has taken maybe five minutes.

I walk across the street to a taxi stand and ask if anyone speaks Azeri.

Several of the men do.

I ask for a taxi, prepay it, and am then put in a brand new Peugeot sedan with an English speaking driver. He asks where I am from. I tell him I am an American from Azerbaijan. He smiles, steps on the gas and we are off toward the city.

Traffic. Lots of traffic.

Men and boys suicide-swerve between traffic lanes, while women (girls, I presume) awkwardly dressed in the hijab/manto combo but sporting blue jeans and tennis shoes underneath, ride behind, clutching tight. The eye, ironically, is naturally drawn toward the women. Their cover-all attire is supposed to discourage casual study, but actually attracts it: not only have they become the most salient symbol of the Iranian revolution due to the puritanical dress code imposed by the regime of the mullahs, but they are, by definition, exotic.

Traffic. Lots of it.

And noise, fumes, billboards, shops and people.

Commerce.

I haven't seen anything like it in six months or more.

I have forgotten how it affects people.

It makes them move. It makes them smile.

We stall in the famous (or infamous) traffic jams of Tehran, and I get to study the sidewalk scene.

More hijabed ladies, a few wearing the complete chador. They set off the men, mainly well-dressed, and the rows and rows of shops selling everything under the sun: cars, motorcycles, computers, machine tools, fashion clothes for men and women, and then, most prominently, dozens and dozens of fresh fruit juice stands: bananas, kiwis, strawberries, carrots and oranges--a burst of colors and potential tastes that I have not dreamed of in months.

Bananas.

I haven't had one in a year.

We pass through several traffic circles, where traffic cops stand twiddling their thumbs while drivers observe the ancient Middle East rule of the right-of-way: The Nose Counts. Get your bumper in front of the other guy's, and step on the gas to gain another five yards before hitting the brake to avoid a collision.

Above the traffic circles loom huge pictures of Imam Khomeini and other luminaries of the revolution, as if frowning down on the spirited chaos below. Most of the public symbols of the revolution on billboards look a little shabby compared with the well-polished look of commerce on the street, a bit faded, as if someone has forgotten to touch them up.

I ask where we are and the driver tells me we are on Enqelab Street, or Revolution Street, which runs through the university district where the revolution took its inspiration.

Bookstores and stationery shops. Newsstands, packed with papers and magazines. Cigarette vendors, offering dozens of options. Students. Men and women, boys and girls, laughing and chatting on street. Some couples are holding hands. Many of the girls have their hijabs pulled half-way back, and daringly expose locks of hair. All wear eye make-up. A few sport lipstick.



'Chadored' Students Stomping The Streets Of Tehran

The driver manages to effect a daring, maybe illegal but certainly dangerous The Nose Counts left turn off Englab onto Vali Asr Avenue, and tells me that its real name is Pahlavi Avenue.

Pahlavi?

The Shah, the driver informs me.

Those were the good old days. You should have been here then. I merely nod, and refrain from comment.

Is the driver waiting for me to make an anti-Islamic move?

We turn off Vali Asr on to Ayatollah Taleqani Street and pull up in front of a hotel that says Paramount on the marquee.

Across the street is some sub-office of the Ministry of Administration of Jihad, or Holy War. Bearded men in the windows of the upper floor.

I inquire about a room at the reception; the clerk is Azeri.

There is a room available, and there are two of my fellow citizens also in the hotel. He thinks I am a Turk from Baku.

No, I am American, I insist.

The receptionist is non-plussed and calls the manager.

America? he asks and I nod, showing him my visa.

Ok, he says, you might be American, but you are really a Turk. Else how could you speak Azeri?

I agree.

Yes, I am a Turk but there is something American about me.

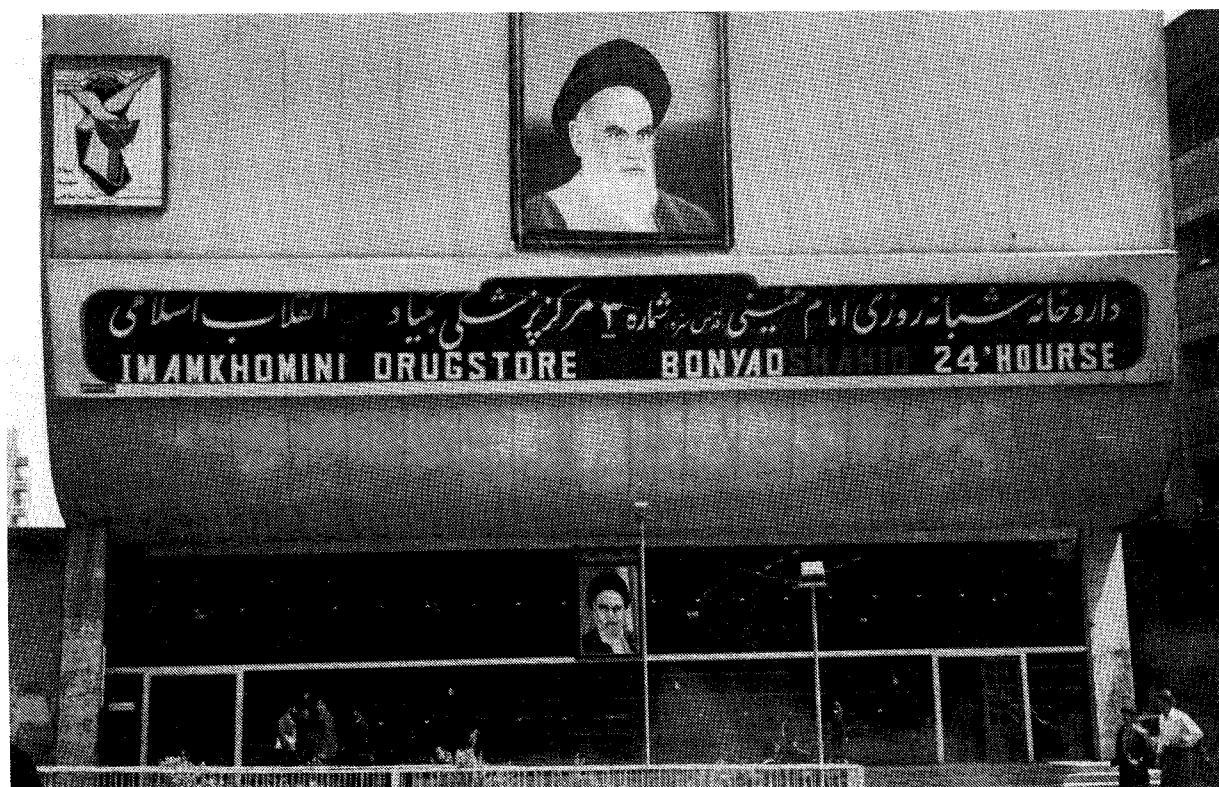
That is good enough.

I take out my credit cards.

Sorry—it is cash only hotel. All are in Tehran.

This is an unexpected and unwelcome surprise.

I start to count my pennies.



Tehran's main drug store, formerly a favorite cinema house

After cleaning up in my room, I called an Iranian-Azeri-American acquaintance of mine, whom I had met in Baku.

Farzin was very suprised to hear I was in Tehran, but very pleased. My suggestion that we get together sometime over the next few days was instantly turned into an immediate link up; he had to show me his town.

The problem was finding my hotel.

This is common problem for Iranian citizens who sat out most of the 1980s abroad: they don't know the names anymore.

But an hour or so later, after going through all the 'P' listing in a hotel directory, he managed to equate Paramount with Pars, the new name, and came over. Along with him was his older brother Afshin who had not seen an American in 10 years.

Wow, said Farzin, they actually let you in!

Afshin was equally amazed.

Things are on the move, he bubbled.

So we piled into Afshin's beat-up mobile and began a merry, motorized tour of the town, swerving between traffic lanes and coming so close to mowing down pedestrians that I was literally hiding my face in my hands.

I had been warned about the very real insanity about driving in Tehran, but was now experiencing it first hand and every rumored word seemed to be true: it was nuts, and the only reason, I am sure, that there are not more accidents and catastrophes is that there are so many traffic jams and people cannot really get up enough speed to do real damage to one another.

Still, in another life, I would like to have the chassis-repair monopoly in Tehran, or at least an interest in bruised-bumper restoration.

It was truly Inshallah driving--God planned all crashes, and men were merely his agents.

We headed North, up-hill, and eventually into an area called Darband--a pedestrian zone of tea shops, restaurants and juice stands running along either side of a babbling mountain stream.

It was, for a city, a very pleasant retreat.

Both the tea houses and restaurants were 'traditional' in the sense that they combined both old and new: dozens of young couples, enjoying the evening air while sitting atop piles of cushions and carpets and nibbling on an assortment of munchies: Fava beans, ice creams and sherbets, an assortment of pistachios and other nuts, chocolates and diverse soft drinks: a bootleg Coca Cola, Seven-Up, various Schweppes and even an 'Islamic' (alcohol-free) beer.

Aside from the head-scarves and Mantos, it could have been Istanbul, Athens or Rome.

People were relaxed and enjoying themselves--and something didn't seem to fit.

This is Iran?

Where are the mullahs and revolutionary guards ready to throw you in some hellish prison for glancing at a woman or daring to smile?

"No one who has not been here can believe it," said Farzin, "This place is in the throes of fundamental change. The mullahs are on their way out. No-one listens to them anymore."

It was all pretty difficult to quantify, he admitted, because there was so much reading between the lines required: the way the ladies wore their Hijabs pulled back to daringly reveal locks of--gasp!--hair; the fact that most men were clean shaven or sporting bushy moustaches--both contrary to the style of beard prescribed for pious men by the Prophet of God.

"There was a Frank Sinatra musical on television last night," Farzin said, almost breathlessly.

"So?" I asked.

"It was the first time in ten years!" Farzin chastised me for my lack of cultural acumen, "Can you imagine? Frank Sinatra, the American! And singing decadent songs on Iranian TV! Someone made the decision to air it! Who? Why?"

Now, a Frank flick does not a counter-revolution make, but there were other signs and signals of change.

The most salient of these, Farzin explained, was the massive non-participation in the parliamentary elections of early April.

No-one voted, and those who had generally voted for the non-mullah approved candidates. The brother of pious president and Khomeini successor Ali Khamenei came in third in the voting in the holy, shrine city of Mashhad, where the Eighth Shiite Imam is buried.

In other areas, the turn-out was so low that even those candidates who had nominally 'won' had to run again in special by-elections because the percentage of the absolute number of possible votes was too low.

(This is a curious, and I think pretty good law; one wonders how it would affect American politics).

In some areas, less than 25% of the possible electors cast ballots. This was, said Farzin, particularly true of the Azeri areas like Tabriz. Traditionally supportive of the revolution, the Azeris were increasingly upset about the government's perceived siding with the Armenians in the Karabakh dispute and they showed their displeasure by effectively boycotting the election.

After some tea and a snack of Shishkebab with a spray of lemon (delicious; I had never considered lemon on grilled meat before) we left our cafe and wandered back down along the footpaths of Darband, now crowded with wanderers, voyeurs and young lovers. Eventually, we arrived at the parking lot, re-collected our car and moved on.

The journey down mountain was the same as our ascent: Afshin wove his way through the heavy traffic, leaving inches between the on-coming cars and those parked near the curb (or more specifically, parked next to the treacherous rain gutters called 'jooobs' that run alongside all major streets).

It was inevitable that we would have an accident and we did.

A car was coming out of a side-street and trying to nose its way into the traffic flow coming up-hill against us.

Of course, it would not stop for us and of course Afshin could not think of allowing it to pass.

So we nosed toward each other until the last minute when Afshin made his Nose First move, which necessitated our changing lanes (lanes? there were no lanes!) at the last minute.

Of course there was a car behind us which then smashed into our back right bumper. The offending vehicle in front of us happily weaved out in front and drove off at speed, leaving Afshin and the driver of the car traveling behind us to negotiate an immediate cash settlement...

Somewhere along our way home we passed a large, imposing building with a huge marquee advertising the structure as the Engalab Hotel, or Revolution Hotel. It was formerly the Hilton, Farzin informed me, and on a whim I asked the brothers if we could take a peek.

Accordingly, we parked our rattle trap with a dented bumper among a row of gleaming Mercedes and strolled in through the foyer.

I guess the only thing that was odd about the hotel was that it was exactly like any other five star hotel anywhere else in the world. Bellhops hopped and waiters waited while assistant managers shuttled around the floors, assuring a dozen delegations of conventioners or deputies from a dozen states that their various banquets or meetings were all in order. Even the lounge felt the same as anywhere else, with the exception that the odd, lonely-looking western businessmen (Germans? Swedes? The Japanese were obvious) were sipping mineral water and not gin-tonics.

It was, as I say, just like any other Hilton or Sheraton to be found anywhere in the world.

But here it was in Iran.

The point is that you can have as many Islamic or Buddhist revolutions as you want, but the desire to maintain public creature comforts at a price is a constant.

Departing from the Hilton (the doorman, the desk clerks and several other people I spoke to were Azeris), and once more weaving dangerously through traffic, we proceeded to Afshin's home for dinner.

It was a in the eastern part of the city, tucked discreetly down a cul-de-sac. And it was not an apartment, but a proper house. Afshin and Farzin's widowed mother lived on the ground floor while Afshin and his wife Hanay lived upstairs. Both dwellings were large, spacious and well-appointed apartments with carpets, tables, comfortable divans and all the requisite material accoutrements of middle class life: VCR, stereo, microwave, dishwasher, etc. The strangest thing about the set-up was Afshin's car, which was a rusted rattle-trap.

When I asked Farzin about this apparent contradiction, and suggested that Afshin was not flaunting his relative prosperity lest he invite the attention of the tax man, Farzin looked at me with amazement and almost laughed.

No, he said, it was merely because cars were so hellishly expensive in Iran, and Afshin had elected to spend his money on the creature comforts of the home.

No mystery there.

I, too, have always maintained a hard and fast rule to never spend more than \$500 on a car, while I am capable of dumping lots of cash toward things like lap-top computers.

In other words, the mystery was the total lack of mystery, and the details of bourgeoisie life in Tehran should be about as interesting as those of a similar family in, say, Minneapolis.

But Afshin's middle class abode was in Iran, where everyone--me at least--somehow assumed it would be different.

Anyway, we perched ourselves on the couches to watch the evening news--the Mujahdeen were closing in on Kabul; the Slavs in the airplane were Ukrainians preparing for a summit visit tomorrow; Rafsanjani was roaming around Bandar Abbas, announcing that the port would be expanded to accommodate pilgrims from Central Asia and commerce from the Gulf. There was, I noted almost with relief, not one word about Nagorno Karabakh and the undeclared war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

But it was this subject that dominated our conversation once the tube was turned off.

Farzin was keen on the most recent news from Baku; there was, he pointed out, virtually no coverage of northern Azerbaijan in the Iranian media.

For my part, I was keen on learning anything I could about southern Azerbaijan and local attitudes toward the North.

Freeing our tongues with liberal doses of Armenian-made illegal hooch mixed with Iranian Coca Cola or 7-Up! and mitigated by coffee and tea, we began a wide ranging chat over the subject, and I was rather surprised by what I heard.

"The (northern Azerbaijan) Popular Front has no idea what it is talking about when it calls for unity," said Farzin. "They say Iran is going to fall apart into its composite, ethnic parts and that we, the southern Azeris, are going to try and join ourselves to those clowns in Baku. I can tell you right now that we had no idea that we were 'southern' Azeris until Baku announced it."

This was, in fact, the Popular Front prediction for the future--and it was a mouthful.

It assumed that 160 years of division between Northern (Russian/Soviet) Azerbaijan and Southern (Iranian) Azerbaijan could be ended with relative ease--and at the behest of the estimated 20 million southern Azeris.

"The (Khuzistan) Arabs didn't join with Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War and the Shi'ites of Iraq didn't join with us," Farzin pointed out, "Why should we give up our lives here to join with a bunch of dreamers north of the border?"

Farzin's mother, who had joined us for the delicious dinner of Persian Gulf shrimp, pilav and then fruit, pointed out that many southern Azeris have a rather sour memory of the brief period of unification following World War Two when local communists, backed by Moscow, took control of Iranian Azerbaijan for a few months until Stalin was forced out by an American/British ultimatum.

But during the few months of Greater Azerbaijan, unknown numbers of capitalists were liquidated; that means every wheeler-dealer in the Tabriz bazaar. Given the mercantile nature of Iran, the idea of liquidating businessmen (and business) is almost the biggest crime one can commit.

The icing on the antipathy cake was the 'business as usual' attitude in Soviet (northern) Azerbaijan when members of the local communist Tudeh Party were hunted down like dogs by Khomeini's Revolutionary Guards following the Islamic revolution in 1978/9. Moscow (and thus Baku's) silence about the slaughter gave many--even non-communist Azeris--certain pause about the ultimate reliability of the (now former) communist Northern Azeris as any sort of partners.

Well, the night was moving on and I was rather exhausted from all the travel and input and the next day promised to be long, so I asked to be brought back to the hotel.

Afshin wanted to send me on my way with a bottle of the hooch, but I begged off: it didn't seem like a very good idea getting smashed on my first night in Iran.

That it was possible at all was by now hardly suprising.



The Golden Arches Defiled---or Deified?

22.4.92 Wednesday

Farzin came over to pick me up and show me the town on foot, and the whole tour might be summed up under the rubric 'Not in Baku'.

The word is commerce.

If I hadn't noticed and noted the fact yesterday, let me say now: the place is bustling.

Perhaps if I were coming from, say, Istanbul, I would not be so impressed.

But after Baku, Tehran seems like a beehive of activity and a consumer's paradise.

The following list is only what caught my eye in the way of personal and professional interest; another would have noted an equal number of other things, I am sure.

But this is what I saw.

Shirts, suits, quality material, clothes, socks, stereo and electrical and computer equipment, fruit juice stands, spice stores, book stores, hardware stores, plumbing fixture outlets, fresh fish and meat stands, BMW dealerships, motorcycle dealerships, fishing tackle shops, dress and tennis shoes stores, bookstores and stationery shops selling superglue, regular glue, paper clips, staplers, 3-D greeting cards, five different colors of pens and five different grades of paper.

At every step along the way I kept on pinching myself and wondering how it could be that one could get anything one needed or wanted.

In retrospect, of course, the above list doesn't seem very special at all--you can get it all in a K-Mart, a Kaufhaus or the French/Spanish/Greek/Turkish/Singaporean/Tokyo equivalent.

But after Baku...



The Big Blue...er, Green: IBM--Iran Business Machines

We started our tour of town in the university area. There were a lot of books stores and other shops catering to the student crowd, but I cannot pretend to a judgement about the selection of reading material because I lack Persian and was obliged to divine the contents of books from their jackets.

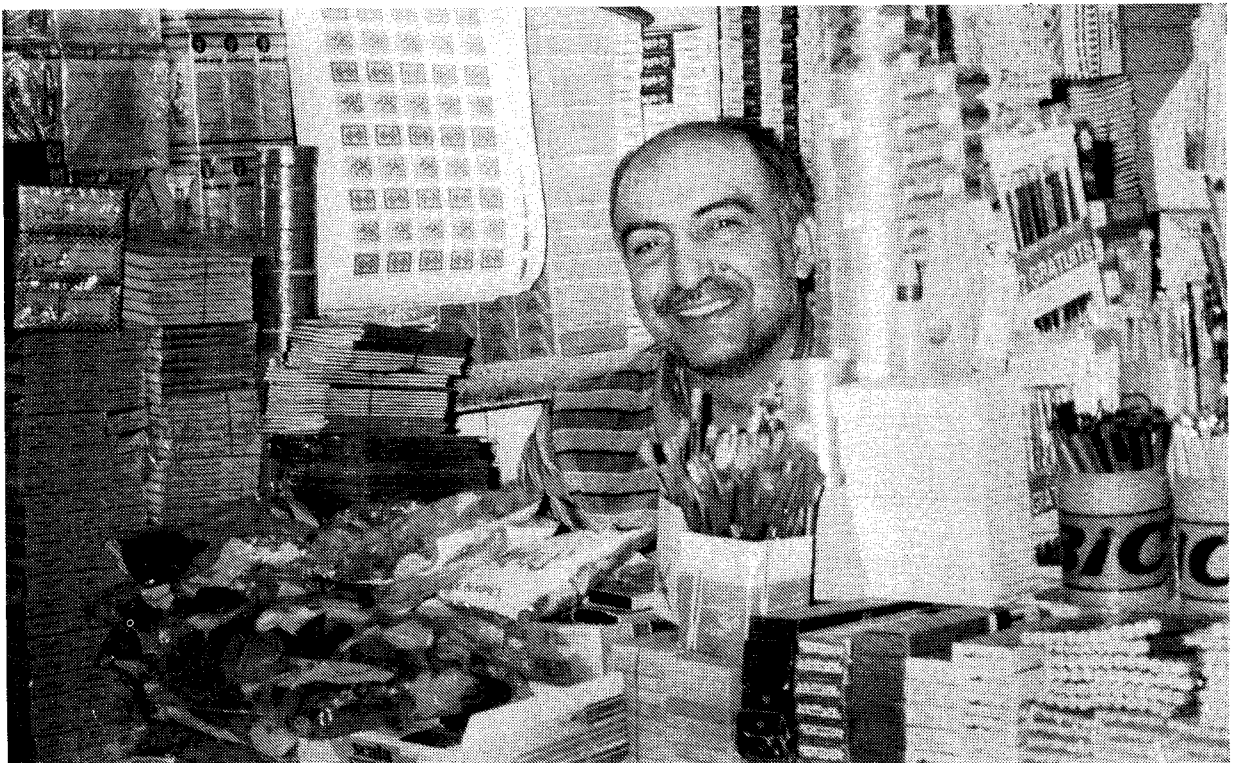
There was a lot of Islamic related stuff, and one book jacket depicting the deposed Shah in some graphically compromising position was a regular feature of most window displays. Most of the titles seemed to be what one would expect to find in a university area: law books, medical and engineering texts and all sorts of literature: originals and translations of western authors like Hemingway, Sartre, Goethe and Cervantes plus originals and translations of Farsi classics like Omar Khayyam and Ferdowsi; there was also a healthy amount of bootleg publishing: I picked up a standard Persian grammar that was clearly an illegal reprint of the original; I presumed most of the publishers of the academic and technical titles available were also skipping details like royalties when they issued their books.

After a quick tour through the university district, we moved on, after several libations of kiwi and banana juice, towards the Bazaar.

But then I had an idea.

I was traveling with a fixed lens Zenit camera because my sexy Pentax had been stolen in Baku.

But after an initial visual sighting of Tehran, I knew that the manual adjustment of dials would never do: you had to be quick, shoot from the hip, as it were, in order to get a 25 year old Mullah walking down the street in his robes holding hands with his favorite chadored gal. As a result, I decided to replace the piece of Sov-junk with something with the lense muscle I needed to capture images of Iran while I had the chance.



The sort of office stuff one only dreams about in Baku

Thus the problem was twofold: a) finding an appropriate camera and b) paying for it with something other than my limited supply of cash.

The first was easy.

Cameras of every make were everywhere.

The second was more problematic.

Due to sanctions, suspicions and probably other reasons I cannot begin to fathom, not one international credit card is valid in Iran.

At first I thought that there must be a mistake, and dropped into bank after bank, but was finally assured that this was indeed the case by a deputy director of the Central Bank itself.

Sorry, he said, we want it, but maybe later...

The implications of this state of affairs is beyond the scope of this epistle (and indeed, my understanding), but must be profound: people must purchase everything with cash, or local-bank approved checks which might bounce at any moment.

Now, Azerbaijan is also a cash economy--but there is nothing to buy, and so one doesn't worry over much about things like credit.

But the tour through Tehran's electronic shopping district revealed that everything was on sale, ranging from the latest Kenwood speakers for compact disc players to a Les Paul electric guitar, selling for over the local equivalent of \$1,000.

Most people elsewhere don't walk down the street with that kind of cash stuffed in their pockets, and most merchants elsewhere would not take the chance of releasing such objects--as well as stereos, videos, fax machines and other sexy gizmos associated with work and relaxation in the First World--for anything less than cold currency or Amex Gold.

But in Tehran, an alternative system of purchase and payment has sprung up--although I have to confess that I don't know what it is save for one's word that one's credit is good.

For an number of obvious reasons, though, my credit worthiness hardly came into question.

I had none.

As such, I was obliged to extend my search over a period of two days, in which I visited over 50 or maybe even 100 camera shops, to see if anyone accepted plastic. Discovering that no-one did, I was next obliged to become a bargain hunter, fixing budget parameters for machines of certain specifications.

Thus began the Quest For A Camera.

It brought me from the university area down the main electronic stores along Engelab Street and finally down into the Ferdowsi Street, the 47th Street of Tehran, where row after row of street-side shops were all stocked from top to bottom with the most recent camera equipment--and for a reasonable price.

There were Canons and Nikons and Minoltas and Pentax and god-knows-what else, including up-market Zenit models you cannot find anywhere in what was the USSR. There was every bag and special filter you could ever want, and all the chemical and papers stores that a mad, shutter-bug could dream of, in addition to a whole line of video cameras, tape recorders and other electronic toys.

The only problem--or the great blessing, depending on how you looked at it--was that I didn't have the cash to buy all the stuff that I suddenly knew I needed.

And the Quest for the Camera served another major purpose: it put my nose into the tangled, complex society that is Tehran.



Electronic Shops Packed In A Modern Khan

On reflection, I likened the difference to searching for a specific item and just walking down the street to the difference between a stroll in the woods and tracking specific game.

When hunting the wily Wapiti, one is aware of everything around--sounds, smells, shadow and light: the rustles of leaves might be wind or might be a buck; if the latter, one has to make the snap decision about the size of the rack, the location of the kill (how many hours dragging) and a myriad other mental connections before squeezing or not squeezing the trigger.

Hunting the camera was the same in a totally different context: rather than scurrying between museums, I found myself in shops and involved in conversations that I would not have had if I had not been a legitimate shopper.

And this was refreshing and revealing.

Refreshing because the moment it was revealed that I was an American--and not, in fact, an Azeri brother from Baku as most initially assumed--the welcome afforded me was extraordinary.

I don't want to exaggerate the pro-American sentiment but I feel obliged to say something about it simply because it is in such total contradiction to outside perceptions about Iran--the most recent negative image promoted by the film Not Without My Daughter!

Naturally, perhaps, I was a little wary at first of revealing myself to be, in effect, the first American tourist in the country in a decade, and hide beneath the fiction that I was from Baku. But Farzin took almost a perverse delight in informing our various interlocutors that I was from the USA, so he could register attitudes for his own research about the changing face of Iran--and the result was universal delight in my presence in the country.

Conveniently, Farzin also served as a bouncing-board for my own casual study of head-counting Azeris in Tehran.

They were everywhere.



A Couple Of Azeri Cops In Tehran

After initially and naturally speaking to people in Farsi first, Farzin began to follow my lead and speak only 'Turki', pretending he was from Baku--and was shocked and amazed how many 'hidden' Azeris there were among the people that he himself assumed to be Persians. We never experienced a linguistic dead-end once and I swear that one out of two of every person we met (drivers, police, man in juice-stand, man selling tapes, man selling socks at a haberdashry, man standing on corner doing nothing, and then maybe two out of three merchants in the bazaar proper) were Azeris.

'Farsi kalmadi,' Farzin said, 'there are no Persians left.'

We proceeded down Ferdowsi through the camera and electronic shops, hit Maydan-i Khomeini (Imam Khomeini Circle) where the Tehran telephone exchange is located. Like many strategic structures in Tehran, it had been hit by a SCUD missile (or some other big bomb) during the 1980-88 war with Iraq and virtually destroyed, Farzin informed me. But now it had been slapped back up like new, and the only trace of the devastation was a large park flanking the exchange building, where some other structure that urban-renewal could not salvage had once stood.

Never having been in the city before, I could not appreciate the level of damage inflicted by Saddam's SCUDs, but Farzin assured me that many of the new 'green' areas in town were the result of a creative--and cheap--response to war-related blight.

Curiously, there was no trace of the human carnage of the eight year war in Tehran. The cripples and amputees that one had to expect were nowhere to be seen; I later heard that they have been tucked away into low profile jobs like those at the telephone exchange.

We continued on toward our planned destination--the labyrinth of the Tehran Bazaar. It was here among the religiously inclined merchants, they say, that Khomeini received the necessary financial support to pull off his revolution.



Ladies' Lingerie Shop in the Tehran Bazaar

Well, there were a lot of Khomeini portraits hanging from walls, but there was also a lot of kitsch on sale using the American flag as a design emblem. Once more, the place was filled with Azeris, and filled with people absolutely thrilled to meet an American--leaving me with the distinct impression that the Khomeini portraits were rather pro-forma.

The bazaar itself was a wonderful, dusty-musty and noisy rabbit warren of lanes and alleyways. As expected, it was organized into discrete service sections, where all the shops, large and small, purveyed the same sort of goods: scores of shoe shops down one lane; utensils and kitchen implements concentrated in another; fabrics here and plastics there.

On the fringes of the bazaar, warehouses were filled to bursting with cases of Iranian made Seven Up! and Pepsi Cola, 12 packs of mango chutney from India, NesCafe from Switzerland, Cornflakes from Germany, Olive Oil from Turkey and even the odd bottle of Louisiana Hot Sauce.

It was very difficult resisting snap-purchases right then and there, but I realized that if I started buying I would be soon be weighed down with a ton of stuff that I craved, so I limited myself to a few luxury purchases like razor blades and shaving cream and a bag of pistachios to munch on.

Pistachios.

Big deal, you might say.

You have not lived in Baku.

And then a thought occurred to me.

There has been much talk about the putative 'rivalry' between secular Turkey and Iran for the hearts and souls of the former Soviet 'Muslim/Turkic' republics of Central Asia and Azerbaijan.

Weed your way through the rhetoric (and there is a lot) and at bottom you are left with trade.

And without Iran being included in the loop, the Central Asian states (and Azerbaijan) can never escape from the orbit of distant Moscow.

It is naturally so: the Iranians (or more specifically, the Azeri bazaar merchants) are masters of moving goods, and the main transport routes in and out of Central Asia quite naturally move through Iran, and not Turkey.

Just this one example: the American embassy in Baku, faced with the logistical problem of getting goods from Moscow, is now considering ways of setting up a 'deep' supply depot in Ankara, from where tax-payer supplied air-craft will periodically fly in shampoo and toothpaste and typewriter ribbons (as it were).

Well, everything you could possibly want is sitting right there in the warehouses of the Tehran bazaar.

Why not just fill up a truck and ship it north?

The political problems of American diplomats becoming dependent on Tehran for their breakfast cereal is evident, but as demand grows among the increasingly large number of resident foreigners--as well as among the local populations of contiguous states--the very proximity of the Iranian bazaar will make it the natural depot and shipment point for a new market of millions.

We finally managed to extricate ourselves from the bazaar and wend our way back to my hotel, beat to the bone: in addition to the exhaustion that comes with massive sensory input, there was the physical weariness that naturally results from hoofing more than 20 kilometers in an urban setting.



Fashion Manto In North Tehran Boutique

23.4.92 Thursday (Iranian Saturday)

More of the window-shopping same, although today's march through town (approximately 15 kilometers) focused on the new town as opposed to the old.

I am beginning to think that I will have to answer the question of 'What did you do in Iran?' with the answer 'I went window shopping.'

The day started with a look through the papers: stories covered Iranian congratulations to the Afghan Mujahdeen, poised to take Kabul and impose an Islamic regime in Afghanistan just while the Islamic content of Iran fades out of fashion. There was also a story about a court case mounted against some publisher for mocking the founder of the Islamic Republic, plus notification about a Caspian Sea conference to be attended by Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan--but not Russia, the main polluter.

Farzin arrived and came over and we walked up Vali Asr (former Pahlavi) Avenue north, concluding the Quest For The Camera with the purchase of a super-automatic zoom-lens computerized gizmo from a shop about a block from the hotel.

When I asked the salesman, a young man from Rasht near the Caspian Sea, if there was any discount for Americans, he dropped his jaw and suggested I take the camera for free. I declined accepting that steep a reduction, but I let him shave off a good chunk and throw in extra batteries, plus a roll of film in exchange for listening to him nostalgize over his days as a high school student in California. He was almost in tears when I walked out the door.

Vali Asr Avenue is effectively the 5th Avenue of Tehran, and we stopped in a number of up-market boutiques to see what was available.

More everything.

And all of it ultimately 'un-Islamic' in the generally understood sense of the word.

In the entryway to an arcade devoted to stereo equipment, a young man was selling disco tapes, advertising his wares with the aid of a street-side ghetto blaster.

True, most were instrumentals and rather far from Donna Summers' public orgasms cooed to a 4/4 beat, and the volume was not as high as one would expect at similar music outlets in Istanbul or even Baku, but the point is the salesman was breaking the law by advertising sin, in the Islamic sense--and just didn't care.

Once again, the signs of change were everywhere for anyone with eyes to see or ears to hear.

Visually, this subtle change was expressed most clearly by the dress code for women and how the ladies were violating it.

In principle--or at least according to the western cliché about fundamentalist Iran--women should be covered from head to foot in the chador, the all-enveloping black sack that defends their honor by preventing the eyes of unrelated men from wandering too freely--and thus protects the fidelity of the men as well.

But while some women do wear the chador, most have rejected it in favor of a Hijab/Manto combination--the Hijab being a headscarf designed to cover everything but the eyes (and certainly that old libido-stimulant, hair) while the Manto is a sort of 'Islamic raincoat' designed to cover everything else.

Drilling the point home was the occasional splash of Islamic graffiti on walls, announcing "Bad Hijab or No Hijab (is) the source of all prostitution!"

But girls were walking under the self-same pious proclamations with their head-scarves pulled back to reveal frosted hair and even bits of naked ear; the only thing hiding their mascara-described eyes were fashion sun-glasses.

Herewith another bizarre development related by Farzin.

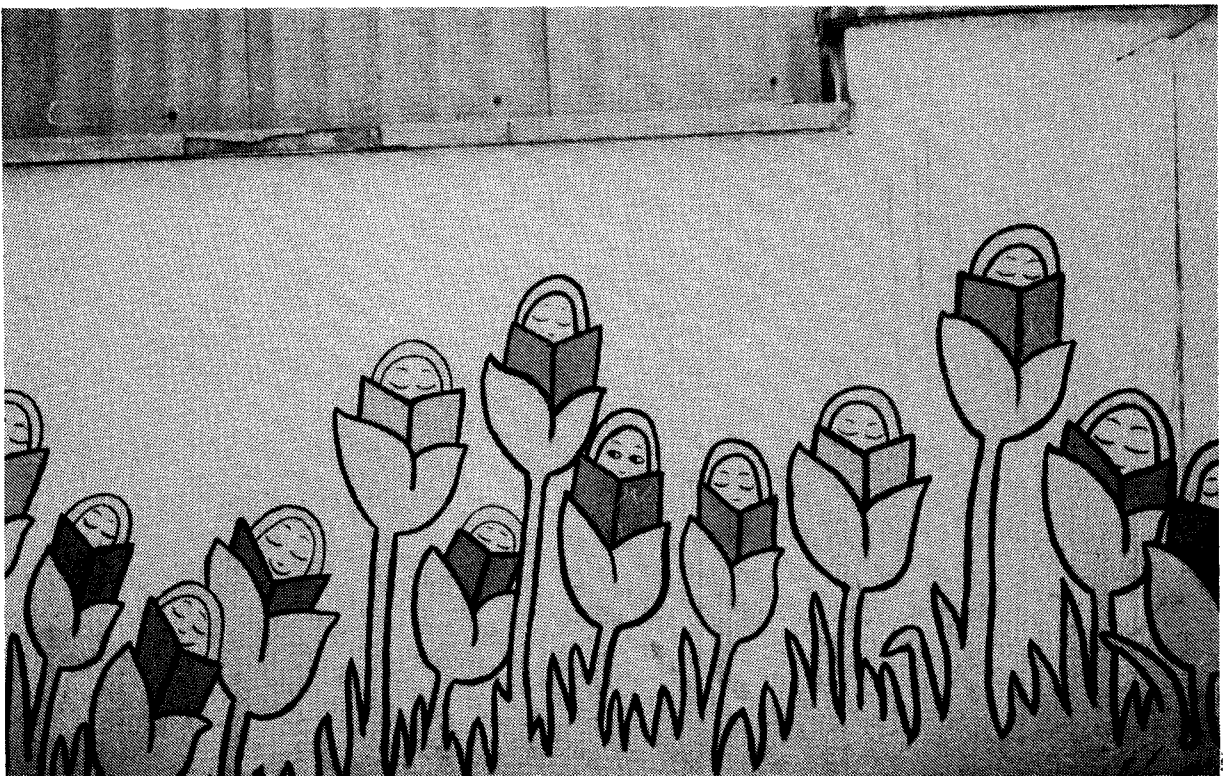
Word has spread through Tehran that the devious, devilish Americans have hatched a truly nefarious scheme to destabilize the Islamic Republic: Iranian women, responding to a secret signal by the Great Satan on the Voice of America, would throw off their Hijabs and defy Islamic law--rather like the mass action in Saudi Arabia in 1991 when lady drivers daringly told their drivers to stay home while they took the wheel, forcing the authorities to arrest them all to the great embarrassment of the House of Saud...

Well, the authorities in Tehran would not make the same mistake. It was, in any case, clearly impossible to arrest tens of thousands of women exposing their hair. Thus, making a virtue of necessity, the authorities had prepared a brilliant counter-move: They would not rise to the tainted bait!

They would not arrest anyone at all...

Now, one might well wonder if the Great Satan, assisted by the Siren of the VOA (or RFE or RL or whoever), actually hatched such a childish scheme in the first place.

But the mere fact that such a rumor was being passed around at all brings up several interesting points:



Wall-drawing of hijabed girls reading books (Qurans?) blooming from tulips--the symbol of death and martyrdom

- a) the belief that a lot of Iranian women are so sick of the Hijab business that they would fall fool to the American plot
- b) that the same women are listening to the VOA and
- c) that the authorities are reluctant to take action against anti-Islamic protest.

Farzin read between the lines and came up with this: the putative Off With The Hijab plot was a means of conducting an initial sounding of public opinion about lifting the requirement to wear the head-dress at all.

The Manto, or 'Islamic raincoats', also remains mandatory--but is also undergoing a 'fashion' transformation. Manto now come in a variety of colors, fabrics and cuts designed with braids and tassles...If not designed by The United Colors of Benetton, the Manto is almost sexy in several of its permutations.

And what is worn beneath it is hardly a secret: the ladies' shops are literally packed with the most up-to-date lingerie, body-fit T-shirts, blue-jeans, spiked heels and jewelry, presenting the bizarre spectacle of presumably 'pious' ladies (they are wearing the Hijab and Manto, aren't they?) window-shopping for exotic toiletries and frivolous panties in downtown Tehran, oblivious or indifferent to the presence of a muddled young clerical student of down-cast eye who is wandering by.

In a word, fun and fashion are in the process of overthrowing the mullahs.

Or:

The supermarket is the new opium of the masses.

Take your pick, or chose a bit of both.

But I can tell you one thing: the folks buying Nike sneakers and Anais Anais perfume ain't wearing them to the mosque.

Anyway...

We stopped into a juice stand (run by Azeris of course) and then again for a quick snack in the IranMac restaurant, set up exactly like that place of the Golden Arches; down the street was the Tehran headquarters of IBM--Iran Business Machines. From there we proceeded through a large, pleasant botanical park where Farzin had courted girl-friends in bygone days; the young couples were still there, whispering sweet nothings to each other on benches and sitting on the grass between the trees.

From the top of the park, we turned downhill again, dodging traffic down the former Roosevelt Boulevard to the grounds of the huge, abandoned American Embassy compound, where the notorious hostage taking took place in 1979.

The Revolutionary Guards who took over the place had created a Center for the Den of Espionage at the entrance to the embassy, but interest in the reconstruction of shredded American documents has so waned that there was no one even attending the agit-prop stand. The guard on the embassy wall above didn't mind my taking a few pictures and even posing for one, but when I asked to be given a tour of the grounds because I was an American, he just smiled and politely said no because the 'ambassador is not in residence.' I didn't press the issue.

Curiously, the only newly applied anti-American graffiti scrawled on the walls of the embassy compound took the form of Armenian pamphlets informing readers that American imperialism was behind the anti-Islamic attitude of Turkey, which was opposing Iranian involvement for a negotiated settlement in Nagorno Karabakh.

The pamphlets also reminded readers that the next day--April 24th--was the anniversary of the massacre of Armenians in eastern

Anatolia that allagedly started on that date in 1915, and that a march would be held at noon.

Although we had already arranged a hectic schedule for the next day, Farzin and I decided to attend.

Then we stopped in for coffee at an espresso bar owned by a Farsi fashion designer who spends ten months of the year attending the design whims of the Hollywood but comes back to Tehran for the other two in order to relax. It was not Bijan, although the gentlemen claimed to be his mentor.

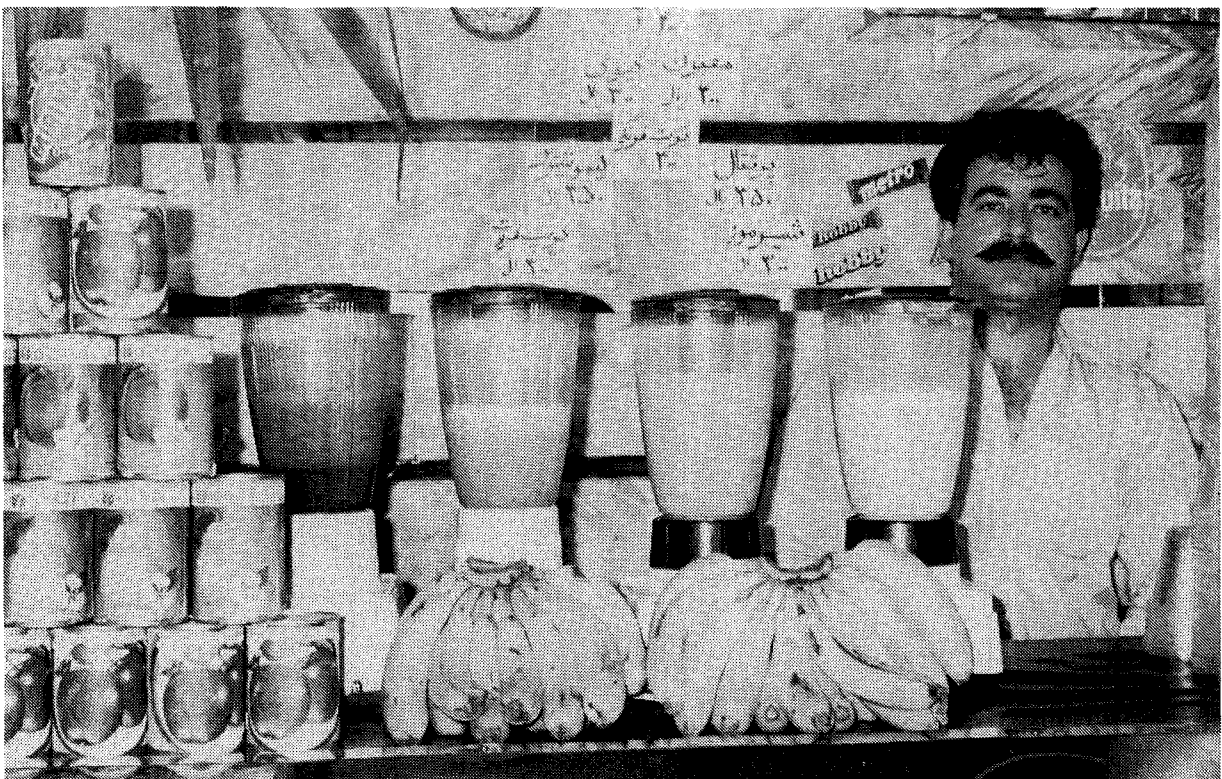
Some quiet jazz was playing on the sound-system, and a couple of pretty girls were smoking cigarettes while sipping capuccinos in a corner, almost waiting for someone to walk and ask them what they thought about the latest film or new best selling book.

Nearby was an art gallery where some quasi 'feminist' portraits were on display--images of male dominance, birds in cages, barbed wire blocking out the light of day--that sort of thing. I asked the artist to pose for a picture in front of (in my opinion) her best work and she did so: a not quite frail, but certainly dainty and lovely Iranian woman painter in front of an almost homo-erotic non-portrait of a slouching man, split between two canvases, with no head.

If it hadn't been for her Hijab, we could have been in Rome or the East Village in New York.

Then I went home to the hotel and chowed-down on a perfectly delicious grill with saffron pilav supplemented by a world-class salad bar, washing all down with my fifth kiwi (or was it banana or raspberry?) juice of the day.

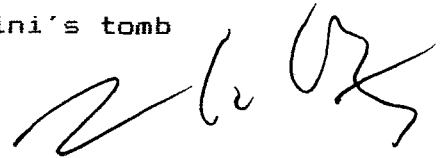
Who needs a nightcap after that?



Azeri juicer and his magic machines

COMING NEXT:

A visit to the Behesht-e Zahra and Khomeini's tomb
The Armenian dirge-parade of April 24th



Received in Hanover June 18, 1992