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An Itinerant in Iran: Part Four

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Missed yesterday's note taking.

Here is the recall.

Woke late for no good reason and certainly not with a hangover and called Naira's brother Riza and arranged lunch. The former is a 'south' Azeri Iranian academic friend from California researching the status of women in Baku who cannot return to Iran because she no longer has a valid Iranian passport, while her brother is salesman of high-tech American-made medical gizmos who has been denied a visa to the USA because some anonymous consular official in Istanbul thought he might not come back.

The irony is obvious, I think.

But there is probably more to it than meets the eye.

On paper, Riza had too many strikes against him.

Not only does he have too many family members settled in the States, but the consular official (probably a Turk) saw another hick from Iran who didn't speak proper Istanbul Turkish--Riza was just another supplicant standing in line.

Now, of course, he has the Big Black Mark: denied a visa once, it will take a lot more explaining than he is interested in doing to successfully apply the second time.

And the denial he received means more than just one less tourist in Disneyland.

Riza's Made-In-USA medical gizmos are big sellers in Iran because folks trust 'em, he says. And although I don't like conferences of any sort I can't help but think that Riza might have gained an edge in moral or material support from his colleagues. It gets lonely out there as the Last (or First) Mohegan, I know. But he couldn't get by the visa officer and now the Iranian high-tech medical gizmos field is left open to his rival countrymen linked up with Japanese and German competitors, for whom visas (and active support) are not a problem...

Anyway, we had lunch and talked about his visa problem, his work and his reception in Istanbul by the Turkey Turks who made him feel cheap and low--a pathetic, broken-Turkish speaking Iranian, Islamic turd, groveling for a visa.

The arrogance factor again.

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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.

I have noted this before but will repeat it here in a specific instance: if the Turks don't watch out, they will loose the good feeling now being generated in Azerbaijan (and, to a lesser extent, in Central Asia) by the fact that they are Turkish by becoming too Turkish, gloating owners of the font of Turkishness, as it were.

Because however shabby and ill at ease Riza was made to feel in Istanbul he felt right at home in Baku: I watched him get drunk and dance the night through the first time I met him, and he was fairly ecstatic in remembering his reception among the 'cousins' to the North.

That is another part of the puzzle that I put in the following place: the Azeri Turks, obsessed with knowing about and trying to imitate the Turkey Turks but faced with nothing but condescension, will probably end up becoming themselves.

That means this: close to, but not identical, with Turkey Turks and resentful of those who assume they are identical--kind of like Austrians who react badly when people assume they are Germans, or when an American asks a Canadian which state they hail from. Presumably, a similar paradigm is now growing among Russians and Ukrainians and probably Roumanians and Moldovians.

After lunch we were met by Farzin, and we went over to Afshin's house where I met a family friend who graduated from a Chinese university and is now the ace Chinese/Persian translator in the land.

Chinese-speaking Azeri Iranian?

Why not?

You forget that sort of thing when you look at Iran through the Fiendish Exporter of Islamic Revolution lense we have all been taught to wear.

You forget that this is a big country with its own interests that go rather far beyond establishing mosques and theological schools.

The Cops of Kharaf

Riza left and we hung around for awhile until a telephone call came from some distant relatives living in the nearby industrial city of Kharaf, located about 40 kilometers West of Tehran. A look of distress crossed Farzin's brow as the conversation proceeded, and when he hung up he delivered the news: the relatives had been robbed, and had asked the brothers to come on out and lend support in their moment of distress. Specifically, they were afraid that the house burglars would return and wanted someone to spend the night at the house: the Monday night burglary was the second in a week, and the thieves had taken some \$10,000 in cash and gold baubles lifted from a refrigerator in the kitchen; the first hit was marginally aborted when someone came home to discover half the carpets, pictures and furniture stacked in the front courtyard.

House burglars in Iran?

It almost makes it seem like a normal country.

Still, the sheer brazenness of the burglary was very strange--a perfect first case for the FAT detective agency to investigate.

(FAT=Future Azeri Turks? No!--Farzin, Afshin and Tommy INC.) So we threw all my stuff into Afshin's car, took our leave of the women of the house, asked the Afghani construction workers across the street if they intended on going home any time soon and then pushed off into Tehran's evening traffic toward Kharaf. We arrived about an hour latter in front of a shoulder-high compound wall, behind which stood the large, spacious, rented bungalow the relatives were staying in while their dream house was constructed somewhere nearby.

(This was, in itself, a little queer: the cousin--or whatever he was to Afshin and Farzin--was a mid-level bureaucrat in the national petroleum company, and the combination the stolen money, gold and jewels, coupled with the value of the various carpets, cars and other household junk--not to mention the investment involved in building one's own dream house from scratch--just didn't tally. Where was he getting the money from? Some government trickle-down? This is a great mystery about the Iranian economy and I am sure it throws off all statistics.)

The burglary seemed too neat and easy, and after our initial commiseration with the family and inspection of the premises, Afshin discretely suggested we step outside. Away from the family members, he said he suspected an inside job. The culprit, he thought, was one of three uncles who had been over-staying their welcome by several weeks. Farzin went along with this notion, and after returning from a street-side conference and making a quick check on the window locks, I tended to agree. The burglar had not come in through any window or door, that was clear. The locks were pathetic. I bent in several with minimal pressure applied from outside, but noted to my comrades that none appeared to be tampered with prior to my experiment.

The family, meanwhile, were busy putting a new lock on the front door--a piece of glass with a laughable lock system, ready for abuse. Stranger still was the insistence of one of the three uncles that the hoodlums had come in from the roof via an interior sky-light, and by rope.

I favoured the obvious: the landlord or some repairman had sauntered in through the front door with a duplicate key.

Then Afshin began a devious ploy, suggesting that maybe we should not stay in the house because I was carrying large amounts of cash stashed in my bags, and feared the thief might return once more. The theory was, of course, that the culprit would come forth in the middle of the night to pilfer my bags, at which point we would nab him. I had one of the three in my sights--a too-happy, too-garrulous character who had mis-identified which refrigerator the missing cash had been stashed in--when it was revealed that he had not been in town the night the place got hit...But it still left the other two, as well as the luxury-loving wife herself...

Suspicion!

It can kill a family gathering...

But gather we did.

There was a lot of tea and cigarettes, with grandma sitting in the corner chain-smoking beneath her chadour while the two, frisky teenage daughters sauntered around in their skin-tight

blue jeans and flirted with me when not ducking into their bedroom to say their prayers. The conversation, typically, was conducted in half Azeri and half Persian. We were prevailed upon to have a delicious, casual dinner after which we snoozed.

The thief did not return in the night.

In the morning, the cousin asked Afshin if he would take the remaining valuables and heirlooms back to Tehran for safe-keeping, and so we loaded up the car with piles of the sort of junk that only people who have lost almost everything would deem so valuable that they had to stash it some place else: gaudy pictures with gold-leaf frames, a favorite carpet, grandma's wedding ring--that sort of thing.

But after departing from the unholy abode, we drove over to the Kharaf bus station to get me a ticket to Noushahr on the Caspian Sea, where an ecological conference had convened, bringing together the riparian states of the Caspian--Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakistan and Russia.

But it was also the death-day of the Sixth Imam, Ja'afar, the greatest consolidator of Hadith, or the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, that distinguish Shi'ite from Sunnah Muslims. In real terms this meant that it was a vacation day and folks was on their way to everywhere and no spot tickets could be had.

There was nothing else to do but drive beyond town, toward the entrance of the Chalus pass, and start hitch-hiking, kind of: while Farzin and I plotted the future of Iran, Afshin waved down passing vehicles, and eventually stopped a big, fat boat of an American-made car. The driver turned out to be an English-speaking Kurd who was less interested in profit than in driving the first American he had met in a decade over the pass, and so I bade farewell to the brothers and go aboard. More important than price was the fact that the Kurd was the most careful Iranian driver I had experienced. The operative word was caution, a comfort that made traversing the notorious Chalus Pass (it was here that Farzin and Afshin's father had been killed) a pleasure.

There were babbling brooks and alpine meadows and late Spring snow-fields and all the other natural, Nordic beauty that one finds so difficult to associate with Iran. People were passing us in cars carrying ski racks--just like keen sportists would do going to Bridger Bowl or Big Sky in Montana of a mid-April, arbitrary national vacation devoted to the memory of an early American cultural icon.

After a couple of hours of winding, cut-back roads, we joined a caravan of cars idiotically competing for one of the twin lanes through a long tunnel; when we emerged, we were traveling downhill toward the Caspian Sea. And with every passing mile the temperature, humidity and greenery increased. Gone was the land of the mullah, the grey-blond tundra-scape of Tehran and the mossy, organized orchards of the southern slope of the Elburs Mountains. We were traveling through a jungle, the land of wild animals--even tigers. We had passed an ecological divide.

After two more hours, we were in the sea-side town of Chalus, where I left the Kurdish driver with the warmest wishes, and proceeded down the coast to Noushahr for the conference.



The Central Square In Noushahr--The Peeling Revolution

Noushahr and the Caspian Sea Conference

I have given the conference a sub-title that it does not deserve. Not that the conference was bad or boring or anything but because I was hardly there.

I arrived in the pleasant, sea-side town feeling rather like an outland tourist in a sleepy little resort in Turkey or Greece. The shops on the main street were filled with the sort of tourist kitsch that you would find in a similar locale--snorkels, swimming suits, sun-tan oil; the works. The only odd thing about it was that there were no Nordic blondes running around in halter tops and short-shorts.

But I was not there for the surf n' sun; I was there for the first ecological conference on the problems of the Caspian Sea, and one sponsored by Iran.

This alone was of great interest.

Consider: when the Soviet Union fell apart, Iran suddenly discovered that it had a fistful of new neighbors: Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkmenistan on terra firma, to which were added Russia, Kazakistan by sea (as well as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan). In addition to whatever political and economic considerations are involved in developing new relationships with the individual states, there was also the fact that the Caspian had very suddenly become an international body of water: fishing, mineral and 'pollution' rights had to be worked out, and Iran had taken the lead in bringing together all the various parties.

Sadly, I cannot report too much.

After lurking around the entry to the Noushahr port half the day, waiting for the delegates to return from lunch, I was advised that I was not particularly welcome to attend the conference because I was not a registered journalist, and had not been invited by Tehran.

I did manage to gate crash the closing session but discovered that the two operative languages were Russian and Persian, leaving me lingually insecure. I also managed to cadge an invitation to the closing ceremonies in a luxury hotel west of Chalus that evening, but was evicted after I dared have a quick conversation with the Azeri delegates.

The authorities, maybe rightly, thought they had identified a loose cannon on the deck and strongly suggested that I leave. Cynically--or more due to sour grapes, perhaps--I was not sad: the conference, I decided, was really not much more than a bunch of bearded bureaucrats extolling the advantages of their ports to a bunch of ex-commie aparatchiks who, by the expressions on their faces, were feeling a bit piqued by not having had a shot of vodka for several days, and whose idea of 'Green' is the dollar, and neither Islam nor the Environment.

Even more sadly, I cannot report much more about the Caspian littoral, as I found myself traveling by night down the coast to the city of Rasht at the far, western end of the Caspian. Between the lively evening streets of the towns we passed were square paddies of rice, glimmering in the near moonlight and dissolving in the penumbral distance, behind which rose the darkened slopes of the Elburs Mountains range. Clusters of lights identified

mountain towns and villages, some of which--I am told--are very picturesque indeed. I rather likened the region to the Black Sea coast of Turkey: crowded and green and cut by many rivers.

Pity it was night and I had no time to stop.

29.4.92 Wednesday

An even greater pity was my decision to stay in Rasht. The only hotel with vacancy in town was some high-priced joint that would not take credit cards, and I was obliged to shell out the equivalent of \$75 of my dwindling supply of cash. The fancy hotel's reception desk didn't bother to wake me this morning and I overslept by some three hours, climbing out of the sack in a sour mood. That Rasht was a mistake was made even clearer when, after catching a bus to Ardabil, I passed through the nearby port of Bandar-e Anzali. I only caught what one catches from looking through a window at the back of moving bus, but I liked what I saw: a port, the confluence of rivers and tidal waters, fishermen in small boats, markets filled with bustling people and evocative, meandering side-streets leading back to mysterious meetings. There was, no doubt, a Caspian sailors' hotel somewhere and I knew it was just the sort of place that you just knew would be special, somehow. Who knows when I will be able to come back and hang out for a day or two? Another life...

As soon as we were on the outskirts of town, the rice fields/paddies began again: little man-made waterfalls with muddy water tumbling from paddy to paddy, the green green mountains to the left, and the blue blue sea to the right.

We were in the land of the Talish--another Iranshahr people who speak a Persian dialect that extends all the way up to Lenkoran in Azerbaijan.

The rice paddies ended somewhere north of Lisar where an old castle doffed a hill near the sea. Beyond that, we skirted Iranian Astara (the Azeri town across the frontier is a dump; they say the Iranian city is a bustling commercial center) and started our climb through hill-side forests up toward the high plateau of Iranian Azerbaijan and the city of Ardabil. About half-way up mountain we hit a long bank of fog and when we re-emerged the trees were gone and we were rolling over a seemingly limitless expanse of mosque-green terrain of early spring wheat and grazing sheep. The crowded settlements and dense planting techniques of the littoral were long gone, replaced by the High Plains in Spring.

It felt like Anatolia.

It certainly sounded like it.

For no sooner had we reached the plateau than all traces of Persian evaporated.

It almost seemed as if people who had been chatting away in Persian in the lowlands immediately began speaking Azeri Turkish as soon as the last tree disappeared.

I had almost forgotten what the point of the entire journey to Iran was all about, but now felt enveloped by the experience.

We had just entered 'southern' Azerbaijan.

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2.1.12



Talish Customs Men On The North Side of the Frontier at Astara
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