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An Itinerant in Iran: Part Five

April 29/30 (Wednesday/Thursday) Ardabil

Although the city of Tabriz was my destination, I also had a couple of other important stops planned in Iranian Azerbaijan.

The first of these was the small city of Ardabil, a place that was almost a venue of pilgrimage for me.

Because Ardabil was the hometown of the Azeri strongman Ismael, later Shah of the 15th/16th Safavid Dynasty--and it was Shah Ismael who brought Shi'ism to Iran.

I have alluded to the subject of Ismael, Shi'ism and the Azeri Turks before, and so I will not belabor the point again here save for reminding the reader that Ismael was an Azeri Turk who brought Shi'ite clerics from the Yemen to promote that brand of Islam in Iran (or more specifically, the realms over which Ismael held sway) and that the ensuing wars between Shi'iah and Sunnah Muslims of 15th and 16th century, pitting Ismael's Safavids against the Ottomans to the West and the descendants of the Timur (Tamerlang) to the East might be viewed as much as being internecine Turkic conflict as sectarian Sunnah/Shi'ite strife.

So, here I was at the political font of modern Shi'ism--the unprepossessing agricultural city of Ardabil, Ismael's hometown and final resting place.

Accordingly, as soon as the bus pulled into the station I jumped a taxi, threw in my bags and asked to be brought to his tomb. And soon we were parking in front of a fine mosque and burial complex, where Ismael, his family and the leading cleric of the day, Sheikh Safi (whence the name of the dynasty, the Safavids) are entombed beneath a wealth of blue tiles and a fine, honey-comb like ceiling of painted, if peeling, wood.

Curiously, the tomb complex seemed almost more to be a slightly neglected museum than a living, throbbing place of pilgrimage--although I gather that Ardabil is quite lively during the first ten days of the month of Muharram, when pious Shi'ite Muslims beat breast and whip themselves with chains in remembrance of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein on the field of Karbala in the late 7th century.

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The Tomb of Shah Ismael and Sheikh Safi in Ardabil

My informant, a man of about 40 who was a veteran of the eight year-long Gulf War with Iran said that participation in such events (and even in mosque visitation) was down in Ardabil due to the growing disillusionment with the government of the mullahs in Tehran. When I asked why this was, he referred darkly to a secret pact made between the clerics and the infidel--IE, the Armenians who were conquering 'Muslim lands' in Nagorno Karabakh.

While on the subject of death and martyrdom and tombs, he took me to another shrine, the shell of an unprepossessing Seljuk-period Friday Mosque built atop a Zoroastrian fire temple, where the Shah had permitted a massive archaeological dig. Then he took me over to see yet another (anonymous) sheikhly tomb on the outskirts of town, allegedly connected to Ismael's burial complex by an un-excavated, five mile tunnel. The crypt, located in a mixed ancient (17th, 18th and 19th century) and modern (Gulf War) cemetery, was decorated with some heretical animal designs on the door but locked for the day and we were unable to find the custodian to open it.

Returning to town, the driver brought me through more cemeteries--whole areas given over to the familiar slabs of rock and mounted glass boxes like those I had seen in the Behesht-e Zahra in Tehran. When I asked about this, the driver told me that Ardabil was a Muslim town and had a very high incidence of voluntarists during the halcyon days of Khomeini's revolution. As such, the area also had suffered (or enjoyed; it depends on how you look at it) more casualties per capita than anywhere else in Iran. Looking at the fields of tell-tale aluminium and glass tombstones in and around the town, I was prone to believe him.

The driver himself was a veteran of the great Ramadan offensive on Basra in 1987, and was proud of the fact. But he was also sneeringly anti-mullah when I inquired about his current attitude toward the Islamic revolution.

Once again, he cited the popular belief that the government was siding with the infidel against the believers in the Holy War over the Holy Ground of Nagorno Karabakh. There used to be a community of Armenians in Ardabil, he smiled, but locals had 'encouraged' most to leave.

Finally, with evening drawing on, he dropped me at a local hotel, refusing to take any money for the three hour tour of the town and environs and I was left with the following thought: if pious, even fundamentalist Ardabil, home to the founder of Shi'ism, is turning ugly on the Mullahs, who is left to support them?

After checking into the hotel (the clerk asked me to pay in Roubles; he was planning a trip to 'northern' Azerbaijan soon) I ran out to take a peek at the bazaar before it closed. If not as impressive as the market in Tehran, the Ardabil bazaar was still a lively affair--rather a mixture of modern commercial shops lining the main street, which split the traditional vaulted passages in two. On one side of the traditional bazaar were the gold and jewelry and rugs shops, while on the other were found

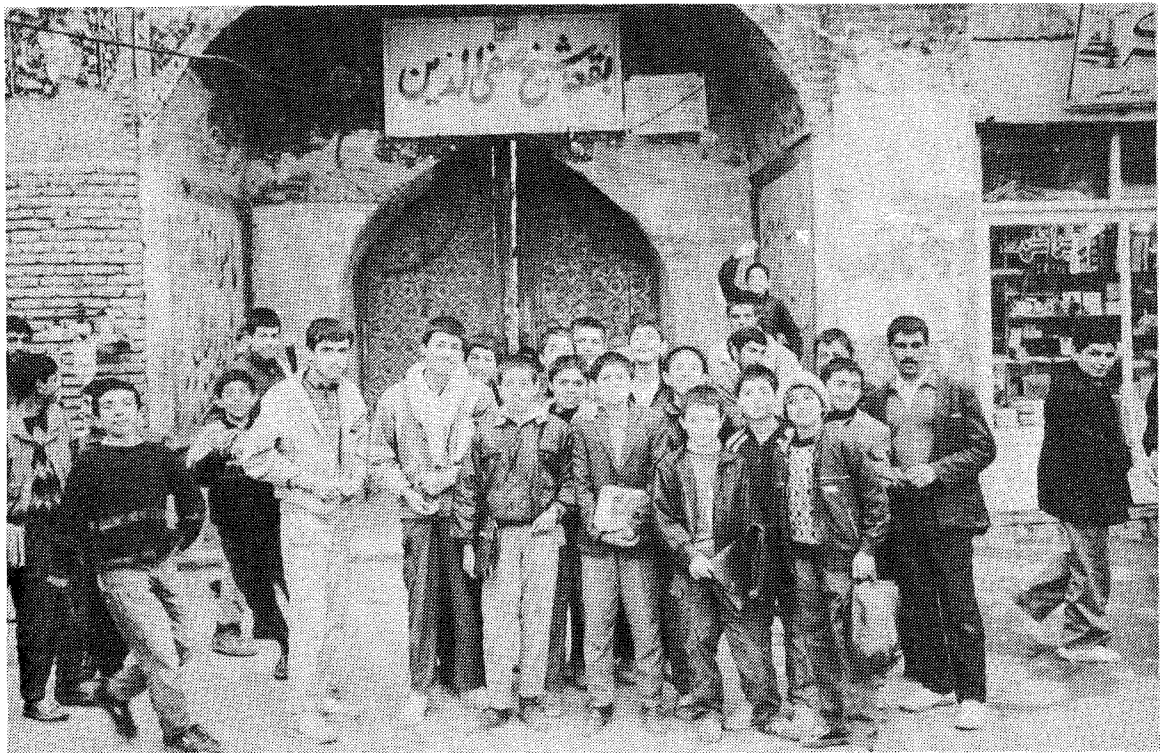
the textile, shoe, kitchen goods and sundry shops; there were even a few that specialized in cheap, Russian goods: cameras, plastic water boilers, hockey boots sans blades, and other items that fall under the general rubric of 'Sov Junk.' These items compared very badly with the German, Japanese and Korean stuff on display elsewhere in the market, but apparently filled a down-market niche for those strapped for cash.

The modern bazaar, on the main street, was more impressive than the traditional bazaar. Here were electronic shops, haberdasheries and other stores, including one that specialized in something like 100 different types of honey. There was also a range of stand-up (or squat-in) eateries with traditional Turkish snacks: yogurt soup, liver, lung and beef kebabs and then sweets and sweets and sweets. I do not usually have a sweet tooth, but I couldn't resist trying out a honey-soaked piece of local baklava, a nutty something called 'three ears' due to its shape, and then a straight chunk of chocolate. All were superb. Simpler than the fancy, famous Persian chow, but fine indeed.

Then I went back to the hotel and discovered another aspect of being back in the eastern Turkish world: the casual attitude toward public hygiene, or more specifically, the casual attitude toward clean sheets.

I checked out and demanded my Roubles back and found another cheap but adequate hotel, from where I now write these notes.

What else. I am not sure if I have mentioned this, but the news is all about Afghanistan and the collapse of the Nejmetallah regime and the victory (and internecine battles) of the mujahadeen.



Azeri Youths in Front of Shah Ismael's Tomb in Ardabil

I often feel burned out by keeping a diary. It took me several hours to face the machine tonight. Perhaps because I have done most of my thinking on the subject of Azerbaijan while in Tehran!

The truth is that travel--even several days away from a temporary base--can be exhausting in invisible ways: the numbness that comes with walking around, eyes and ears open, in an unfamiliar environment, the subtle bloating that comes with the excess food and drink consumed either because of the desire to experience something different or simply because you need an excuse to have a place to stop off. I won't even mention the chain smoking in the street for reasons I cannot adequately explain, save for the need to live off familiar poisons.

And there is also something else nagging me that I haven't mentioned. I have been fouling up my brain by pushing through a crash course in Persian, with the school room being the back of the bus or cafes and restaurants. I have been making good progress, mainly because I know half the words from Arabic and Turkish and am just trying to stuff the familiar into new form.

More: I think that I should make a major commitment to gain the tongue and I feel foolish for not having studied it before. The reasons for not doing so were the same reasons for shunning the study of Russian: there seemed to be little point in learning a language you will never use in the country where it is natively spoken. Save for wanting to become a dictionary spy and pour over newspapers for nuances, there didn't seem to be much point. But now both are high on the agenda and I feel remiss in having waited until now. Maybe I am exhausted at the prospect of opening up a couple of new worlds.

30/4/92 (Thursday) Tabriz

I have a hyper-ventilation high or just plain headache after smoking three bowls of Shiraz tobacco in a hubbly-bubbly pipe in a Tabriz tea-shop, and it is difficult to write these notes.

I have not smoked a water-pipe in a long time and with very good reason: the anticipation of exactly this kind of headache.

But there was no getting out of it this time.

After a stroll through the fabulous Tabriz bazaar near closing time, I spotted a row of men honking on their hookahs, took a picture and then was commanded to sit down to take pipe.

The first was obligatory. The second was not.

But by the time the attendant came around a third time, I was just smoking and changing table partners. I didn't (or couldn't) leave the place for two or three hours and it goes without saying that I have a bunch of new pals.

Now, I have been the cat's meow in more obscure Turkish and Kurdish villages in Turkey than you can shake a stick at.

But I have never seen a reception like that afforded me in Tabriz, Iran: I was an Azeri-speaking American, something no-one had ever expected to show up in the smoke house. And the fact that I could communicate with locals in their own language-- Azeri, not Turkish and not Persian--left them trembling with a sense of delight and jubilation, a sense, perhaps that Iran, their Iran, was indeed part of the world.

There is a lot of confused and contradictory information in that sentence, but please, digest it as it stands: pro-American Azeri Turks dedicated to the idea of their own Iran.

My fellow smokers were regulars at the shop, and came from a number of different niches of Tabriz society.

One worked in the retail end of the huge shoe-maker section of the bazaar. Another was a driver. A third was a chicken salesman. Nearby were also a couple of students who were studying a text written in Cyrillic. I asked what it was and discovered that they were working their way through a treatment of the pan-Turkic epic Dede Korkut ('Grandfather Korkut's Story'). The reason for their lipping the words was twofold: they wanted to study medicine in Baku and assumed that Azeri Turkish would be the language of instruction. But they also wanted to read the epic because Azeri in Cyrillic is the only written Azeri of any sort at present, save for a few, odd books of poems.

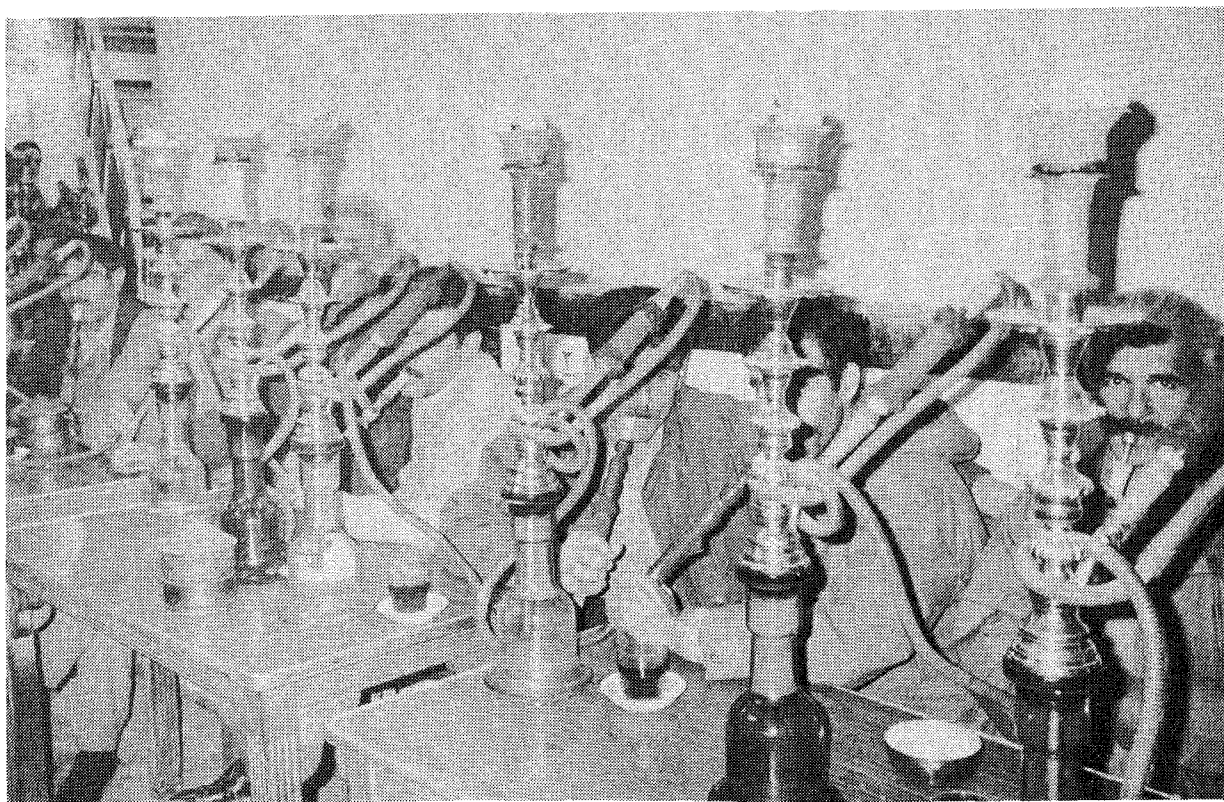
Why do I always find myself becoming the recipient, vessel and purveyor of this sort of odd, contradictory info, the kind of stuff that so goes against the grain of conventional wisdom?

Why do I always run into Azeri hookah smokers in Tabriz coffee shops who want to study Azeri in Cyrillic, or others in Tehran who are ripping down April 24th Armenian anniversary signs?

Why doesn't anybody else?

Maybe because they don't bother to blow out their lungs in hookah dives in Tabriz.

Anyway, the lads wanted to travel to Azerbaijan and asked what they might bring as gifts for relatives.



Honking Hookahs At A Smoke Shop Cafe in Tabriz

I began with a short list that grew into a long list that included everything that I had just seen in the wonderful Tabriz bazaar that day and wanted to buy and bring back--bananas, cinnamon, office stuff (tape, paper clips, tacks), coffee, butter, shoes that fit, switch blade knives, material to make suits, linen shirts, pistachios and, of course, electronic gadgets of every sort.

(I did not think to include the packs of condoms, replete with the picture of Muhammad emblazoned on the pack to give religious sanction to birth control, on the master list.)

Then I decided to reduce the list to one easy item that would be sure to make life-long friends: the five kilogram cones of sugar known as 'kaant' in Azeri.

I tried to explain to my unbelieving listeners that you can't get sugar in Azerbaijan, not even the powdered stuff.

Your cousins chew bad candy with their tea, I said.

Head spinning and lungs aching, I finally managed to break free and returned to the hotel to jot these notes.

(By the way, it was snowing this morning as we left Ardabil by bus--and tomorrow is May 1st. The ride was uneventful. A long, tedious crawl across the high plains that stretch from the Caspian Sea to the Aegean--identical landscape to that in eastern Anatolia: cold, green/grey, treeless steppe. Perfect for sheep and the related products derived from animal husbandry; not very stimulating visually, unless you hail from Nord Dakota or eastern Montana or the high veld of South Africa or maybe the pampas of Argentina or parts of Australia, the last two being places where I have never been but feel viscerally drawn to by dint of imagined similarity with the terrain I know so well.

The villages we passed through were shabby: muddy lanes and adobe-brick houses, often clustered around the remnants of some half-destroyed Islamic monument or other that the archaeologists among us no doubt delight in, but that leave others among us--yours truly, me--wondering why o why we/I simply and succinctly sum up such landscapes as The Land Of The Turk.

Maybe that's it. I am often accused of being 'pro-Turkish' (whatever the hell that means) but it is probably more accurate to accuse me of being 'pro-high plains'.

I am naturally drawn to that sort of vista, the sort of place where on a typically over-cast day you can't tell direction because there are no land-marks, the sort of place that drove the Fjord-dwellers from Norway crazy when they got out of their wagons on the West Bank of the Red River Valley because all sharp and most subtle definitions of landscape were gone, and they found themselves in a place where there was nothing to hide behind.

1.5.92 Friday (May day)

Today was Friday and my chance to check out religious sentiment in (southern) Azerbaijan on the Muslim Sabbath.

Accordingly, I sought out the main mosque to attend the prayers, and learned that it was just down the street from my hotel.

This was surprising because I hadn't noticed any grand mosque in the neighborhood.

But asking for directions, I was sent over to a sort of walled compound, festooned with the usual portraits of the Ayatullah and various pious epithets scrawled on banner and wall. There were also a large number of election posters of men with neatly trimmed beards and hijabed women. The accompanying resumes suggested that all the candidates owed a deep commitment to the Islamic revolution.

But more important than the public face of the mosque was security.

There were armed guards everywhere--police and soldiers--insuring that the Friday prayers would proceed as planned.

It took no genius to figure out that the mullahs were concerned that something untoward might occur at any moment.

Bombing the mosque?

Who?

I asked one young man with an automatic rifle why he was there.

Security, came the obvious reply.

From whom?

From those who wish to plant bombs or disrupt the services.

Who are they?

Those who don't like the revolution.

But the revolution happened ten years ago.

The enemies are still out there.

Who? I persisted in my line of inquiry.

America, the others...

Who are you? a guard asked.

I chose to identify myself as a Turk from Azerbaijan, and allowed the guard to conduct a quick frisking before I proceeded to enter the mosque.

It was not prepossessing.

In fact, the mosque was more like a huge, covered parking lot (it was exactly that) with minbar, qibla, etc, pinned on almost as an afterthought--rather the way the diverse, pious graffiti and obligatory anti-American banners were tied to scaffold and ceiling brace.

The 'mosque' was a huge, imposing wall made of ancient, now uncovered, brick located outside the area of prayer. It was literally 'a wall'; the other three supports--and the roof--were missing. There wasn't a hint of tile work or any other attempt to disguise the fact that the wall was just a huge wall made of brick.

But it was clearly an ancient structure. And after requesting permission from the Revolutionary Guards guarding it, I was allowed to almost circumambulate the whole thing; the face with the mihrab, however, was included in the ladies section of the mosque, and thus off-limits.

Who built this thing? I asked, staring at several wallop-marks where a canon ball had impacted on the ancient bricks.

Shah Abbas, came the reply--conforming with the cliché that any unknown building from the past was built by that Iranian ruler.

I returned to the men's side of the mosque and learned that I was about an hour early for the prayers.

Oh, I said, marginally unnerved by having to hang out with the pious for an hour after having been exposed as someone who didn't know when the pious prayed.

I was, as I previously confessed, passing myself off as a Turk.

My success in doing so was less a cause of self-congratulation when I was informed--and then introduced--to two other 'brothers' from Turkey who were also waiting for the service to begin.

They were young and wore neatly trimmed beards and looked like just about everyone else standing around but they were different. They were from Turkey.

Oh-oh, I said to myself.

Exposure as a fake Turk and fake Muslim.

They do nasty things to people for playing with the Truth, like kill them on such charges as 'apostasy' and such like.

Yikes, I said, and went into Save-Your-Ass-Emergency-Mode.

Quickly and imperfectly changing from Azeri to Turkish (this has become a problem; my small brain is incapable of maintaining any one language purely when exposed to a dialect for a period of time), I alluded to the fact that I was living in Baku and working as a writer and strongly and repeatedly stressed that it was my wife who was the Turk and that I was a mere, imperfect and relatively recent devotee of obscure heritage.

I think I muttered something about being Balkan, or half-Balkan, or something; lots of people assumed I was from Bulgaria or Yugoslavia--Turkish enough to be a Turk, even though I had this weird Azeri accent that threw everyone for a loop.

The main point was to keep talking and get them and myself out of the mosque before any real slip happened, and so I suggested that we have tea somewhere before the prayers.

The pair, no doubt a little non-plussed and confused by the friendly response they were receiving, agreed.

And before they could inquire any further about my identity, I managed to get them out of the mosque (and beyond the reach of the revolutionary guards manning the metal-checking machine) and down the street in search of a tea shop.

It was around this time that the conversation, focusing on the 'homeland' (Turkey) turned weird.

The pious pair were from the eastern Turkish town of Malatya.

How interesting, I ventured, Are you Kurds?

They were indeed of that persuasion.

I almost breathed a sigh of relief.

The room for duplicity had just been expanded by a factor of five, and I found myself slipping back into the Azeri of the North, a dialect that would confuse and amaze the pair of cautious Kurdish Turks (or Turkish Kurds) and allow me all the lee-way I could possibly want.

Does any of this make any sense to anyone reading this?

He feels secure because the religious guys from Turkey are really Kurds who are more confused by his Azeri than by his person? By God, sometimes it is strange out there in the field...

Anyway, we proceeded to talk about things Kurdish in Turkey: about what they wanted from the future, their thoughts about the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), the Muslim movement and a host of other issues that were not only of interest to me but, more importantly, were important to them.

In other words, I got them talking.

You don't make a lot of grammatical mistakes when you are listening...

The main point of conversation, naturally enough, was the guerrilla war in Turkey.

I won't dwell on the issue now, save for the general comment that that ugly ethnic war has heated up considerably over recent months.

I asked about the rise of a Hizbullah Party that has been reportedly involved in shoot-outs with the PKK; the group has been rumored to be supported by the Turkish secret service.

The pious pair suggested the latter, although they took care to distance themselves from the PKK.

There was, they said, a new, inchoate Muslim consciousness among the Kurds. But it was not ethnic-specific. It was pan-Islamic. Kurds, Turks, Laz--everyone.

It was altogether a strange if pleasant chat, this conversation between Tommy the Fake Turk and the two religiously inclined Kurds from Turkey, but it was interrupted when a group of perhaps 50 men dressed in orange overalls started marching down the street outside the tea house.



Garbage Men Marching Under Police Guard To Prayers in Tabriz

They were chanting 'Death to America,' walking behind a couple of banners and being conducted by a squad of police.

Excuse me, I said, and slipped outside to take a few pictures. Who are you? I asked, approaching the procession.

Shahidler, came the reply.

Witnesses. Martyrs.

It didn't quite fit.

Most, if not all, of the men in the orange overalls were at least 50 or 60 years of age.

Perhaps they had sons killed in the Gulf War.

I took a couple of pictures before the procession was past, and it was gone almost as quickly as it appeared.

I was joined on the street by the two Turkey Kurds.

Well, shall we go? asked the first Kurd, suggesting that we follow the garbage men to the mosque to perform our ablutions and prayers.

Let's go, said the second.

It was not a challenge but the thought filled me with dread.

Just then, we were joined by four men who had been sitting across from us in the tea shop.

Hello, they said, are you from Turkey?

The Kurds said yes.

This was true enough geographically speaking, but after our discussion about their politics the pair were very suddenly on the slippery slope of traveling incognito--just like me.

In a sense, they were in my power.

I took a quick decision.

I would let my identity drift and let the Kurds answer for me.

But I decided to get a more exact answer about the identity of the men in the orange suits.

Who were those guys? I asked. They said they were martyrs...

Garbage men and street sweepers, came the reply from the four Azeris, almost in a tone of disgust. The government encourages them to go and pray together and march like that, they said.

Civil servants.

Garbage men, firemen, teachers and cops.

People dependent on government largesse.

Like the guilds of yore, I thought.

Going off to group prayer, almost under duress.

Let's go to the mosque, suggested one of the Kurds, looking at his watch.

Come on, said one of the four Azeris. Let's talk about the Black Sea city of Trabzon. Are the girls really nice there?

I watched the religious Kurds stiffen.

Excuse me? one asked, eying the other.

Trabzon, asked the man again. Is it really as nice as they say?

It is a good city, replied the Kurd vaguely.

No, said the Azeri. I mean the avratlar, the girls--the Russians, you know...the Natashas...

I wouldn't know about that, said the Kurd. Let's go to the mosque.

The four Azeris nearly cackled.

Are you kidding? they said. The mosque? You're going there to listen to those bone-heads?

Aren't you a Muslim? asked one of the Kurds.

No, no, said the Azeri, at least not your kind of Muslim.

If I pray, I pray at home, he said. Never in a mosque. The mullahs wouldn't let me if I wanted to...

Why not? asked the first Kurd, disturbed.

See this moustache? asked the Azeri, pointing to the full Schnaubarz covering his upper lip. This means that I don't want anything to do with them.

Why don't you cut it in accordance with the Ways of the Prophet? asked the second Kurd, referring to the Hadith that suggests that believers trim their facial hair in the way, clearly, that the two Kurds trimmed theirs.

'Cuz I want to show the rag heads that I want nothing to do with them, came the response. Look around! You'll see that most of the people in town feel the same way. You should have been here during the Shah's time. Things were good then, cheap...Those were the days...

Throughout this exchange, I pulled back into the role of complete voyeur.

It was between the pious Kurds from Turkey, mistaken by the Azeris of Iran as being pious Turks, while the sole infidel in the crowd sat back and watched the action unfold.

Enough of this 'they only tell you what you want to hear' nonsense.

I wasn't even there.

I was just a couple of ears, and the conversation went on with them or without them.



Sporting Anti-mullah Moustaches in Tabriz

It was almost embarrassing.

The Azeris wanted to learn about the fun spots of Turkey and the Kurds of Turkey wouldn't tell them where to find them.

Visibly disturbed at finding such sin in the land of Islam, the Turkey Kurds finally turned away.

I walked with them toward the Friday Mosque, but left them with some lame excuse at the door, reluctant to follow them inside.

By now the main street had been closed to traffic, and hidden loudspeakers were blasting out a recording of the Muslim equivalent of vespers, or maybe organ music reminding the faithful that it was time for prayer. But it was not a pre-recorded Ezan (Allah ul Akbar Allah ul Akbar! La illah il-allah), or call to prayer that one hears from minarets throughout the Muslim world. Rather, the speakers on the street carried the intonations of a mullah leading a pre-recorded response from the faithful. The quality of the recording was bad and so I couldn't pick up exactly what the undulating words were, although I can say that they were not inspiring.

Few were responding to it.

The line of garbage men.

Ladies in chadour, bussed in from afar.

The two Turkish Kurds.

A couple of others.

Far more people were walking away from the mosque than approaching it and even those who seemed to be moving in the direction of the mosque were not entering, but on their way elsewhere.

Why then, I asked myself, should I attend?

Maybe if the mosque had been beautiful or even enclosed, or had just providing me with a wall to rest against, I might have attended.

But the Tabriz Friday mosque was a covered parking lot with all the aesthetics one associates with parking lots and there were no walls to rest against and the people were not even going themselves.

So I backed out, and stepped into a nearby restaurant. The pious recording followed me inside, only stopping when the service began. Then the restaurant proprietor turned on the hourly news of the Voice of Turkey to listen to the progress report of Turkish Premier Suleyman Demirel on his Pan-Turkic swing through Central Asia. The owner had his priorities well defined: let me hear about Turks in Kazakhstan; give me no more blather in the mosque across the street.

After a quick snack, I walked out of the restaurant and into a neighboring hat and badge store, where a couple of young soldiers who needed some new regiment patches were being attended by an older man. I said hello.

Ah, you're from Turkey! cried the owner, Welcome, Welcome!

I played along and chatted for several minutes, listening to the man's concern for the health of Turkish President Turgut Ozal, who, he had heard, had been hospitalized in the USA during the course of his annual visit there.

This was news to me, but the concern of the hat and badge maker was real.

Well, I finally said, I am going to be late to prayers. Are you coming?

No, scowled the hat maker, I never go anymore. My religion is at home.

Why not? I pressed the issue.

The mullahs...they have ruined everything here. No, I have no truck with them.

And you? I asked the two young soldiers, Aren't you coming to the Friday prayers?

Naaw...

Why me, the weird witness?

So I left the hat and badge shop and decided to stomp the streets in search of other mosques and return at the end of the sermon to judge attendance at the main one.

This I did.

The first secondary mosque I found was virtually empty; two dozen pairs of shoes in the shoe wrack.

I did not enter.

Then I went down to the bazaar.

Most of the shops were closed, but second-hand and cheap clothes sellers were doing a brisk trade at the entrance and a few shops inside were also open for business.

None of the mosques or mesjids ('churches' and 'chapels,' as it were, although both go by the name of 'mesjid' in Iran) were open. Ditto several older and one brand new mosque at the far end of the market.

There was no one to attend.

I was standing outside one such empty mosque, trying to put the minaret and dome in a camera frame when I was approached by first one and then another young man.

Hail stranger! they said.

Where are you from? Turkey or Shu'awiyah?

Shu'awiyah? I asked, stumped by this nationality.

You know, they said, that place to the North.

As the Turks say, the coin dropped in the box:

Shu'awiyah--'Communism,'

The USSR.

The mystery was solved: they thought I was an Azeri, or some other ethnic who knew that lingo due to residence or study.

I met them half-way and told them that I was from Turkey but now live in the Shu'awiyah city of Baku, Azerbaijan.

What is better, there or here?

Which there? Turkey or Baku?

Both.

There are good and bad sides to each, I replied carefully.

You should have been here during the time of the Shah, said one of the two. Then things were good.

Yes indeed, said the other. During the Shah's time we were just fine. Better than either Turkiye or Shu'awiyah.

Two strangers, praising the Shah for a duplicitous third party, me.

Who was trying to please whom?

Not Iranians trying to please Americans, in any case.

Who am I am? Why now, why me?

Just then, four big, fat, ancient bi-planes came churning overhead from the North and my new friends informed me that they were coming from my putative homeland to the North.

This left me totally confused.

The bi-planes were of Soviet make; I had seen a number of them on airfields in Azerbaijan. But there were no airfields near the Iranian frontier, except for one in Nakhjivan.

But Nakhjivan has a land border with Iran, too. Why use ancient bi-planes to carry freight when a truck would be so much easier?

And what were the planes carrying?

Aid?

Weapons?

People?

Once again, the nagging suspicion was that I was privy to more than I am supposed to be by dint of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I was almost certain that I was witnessing a series of illicit flights out of Armenia.

The hour was growing on, so I returned to the Friday Mosque parking lot to get there in time to see the end of the prayers.

The parking lot, the only functioning mosque in town that I could find (save for the nearly empty secondary mosque a block away) had attracted a mere 1,000 to 2,000 people. Half of those in attendance were women. In terms of age, most of the devotees appeared to be either under ten or over 50.

As they exited the mosque, the faithful were greeted by squads of young pamphleteers, distributing literature on the candidates supported by the Islamic-hierarchy in the up-coming June bi-elections for the Iranian parliament.

Then the faithful boarded buses that had been provided by the state to make their trip home from the mosque easier; these were divided into ladies' buses and men's buses.

A blast of exhaust, and one bus left. Then a second and a third, then ten.

Within minutes, the broad street was empty of the pious.

The Friday prayers were over.

Within a few more minutes, all those who had been avoiding prayers magically reappeared on the street to open shops.

I was left mulling over a number of ideas but that might be boiled down to this one essence:

The people are not only not attending Friday prayers, they are they openly critical of the mullahs and scorn them publicly.

The Islamic Revolution is over.

Incidentally, LA is burning--or so says the BBC, VOA, Voice of Iran and everyone else.

The fun apparently began a couple of days ago--the racial explosion that all the pundits have been waiting for, sparked by

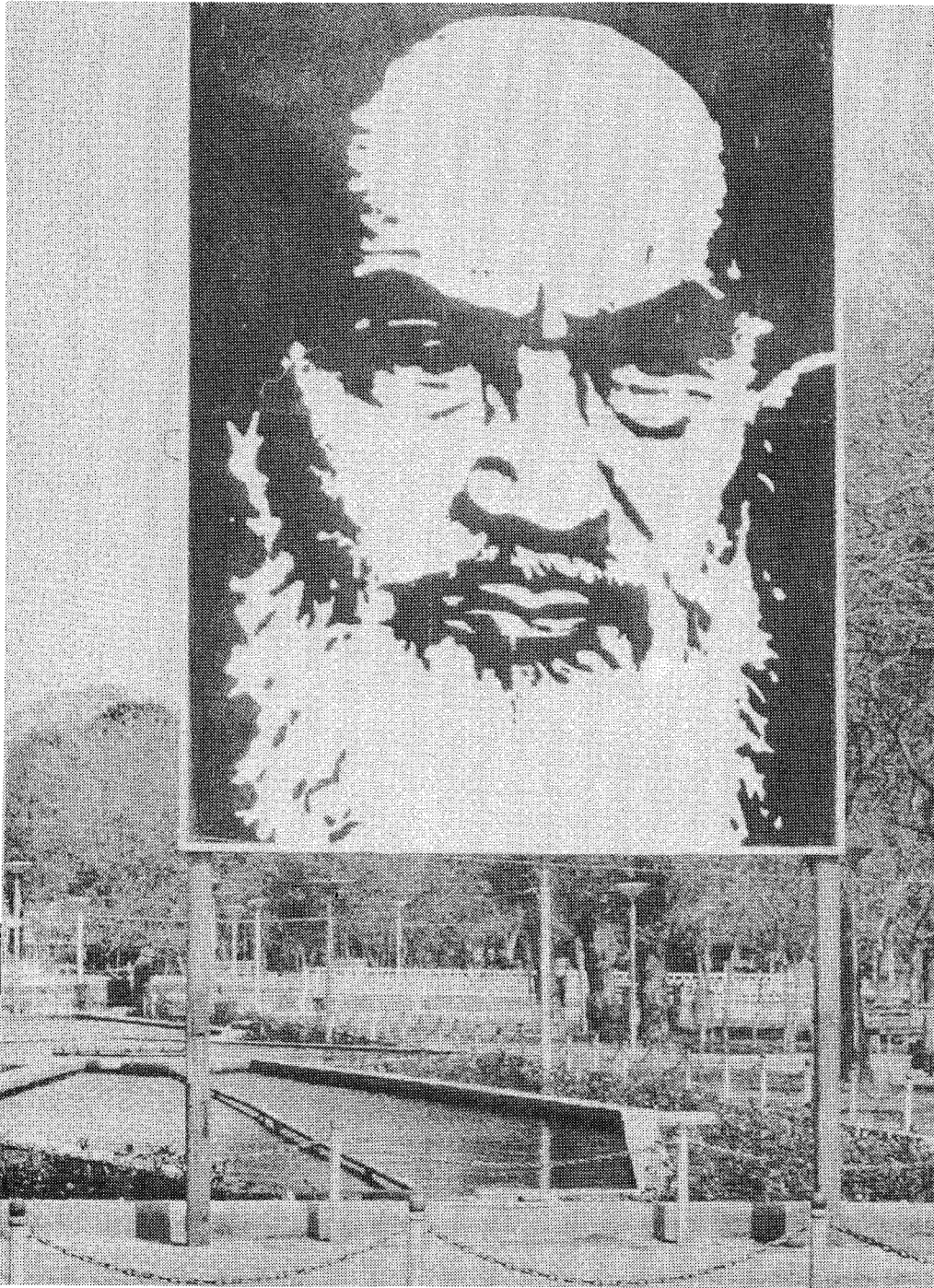
the video beating of Rodney King or whatever the poor guy's name is who got beat up last year.

It seems far away from Tabriz on a Friday, but really, it finds its immediate parallel right here--the ethnic tension stuff one talks about happening in the 'world' (Croats/Serbians, Azeris/Armenians, Israelis/Arabs and even Karakalpaks/Uzbeks).

Why should, how could we be exempt?

NEXT: A Trip to Turkmenchay

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A Revolution On The Rocks? Khomeini Portrait in Downtown Tabriz
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