

My Time in Iran

The recent release of the movie “Argo” brought back a flood of memories. In case you are not familiar with it, the film is based on the true story of the escape from Iran of seven American diplomats after the takeover of the US Embassy by Islamic revolutionaries in November 1979. If you are not old enough to remember it, the whole debacle was pretty horrific. A US ally became an intransigent enemy. There were countless lives lost in the Islamic Revolution. The train of events did much to bring down the Carter presidency. It was one of those pivotal times in history. Here’s my story.

Following the oil embargo of the early 1970s, it seemed that the rising economic powers in the world were centered in the Middle East. OPEC was flexing its muscles as a cartel, and America needed a friend in the region. Jimmy Carter was President—need I say more? Our staunchest ally in that part of the world was the Shah of Iran, a ruler who had come to power in the war-fogged year of 1941 and managed to hold on through the Cold War with support of the Western powers.

By the mid-1970s, Iran was one of the world’s wealthiest countries, despite the fact that much of its populace lived a lifestyle essentially unchanged for centuries. The cities were modern, westernized and cosmopolitan. There were world-class restaurants and active night life. But in the countryside and the poorer parts of town, the deeply ingrained values of Shia Islam held sway, a way of life rooted in Koranic prescripts of the 7th Century AD. The Shah wanted to change all this—or at least he wanted to modernize the country. Following the lead of Ataturk in Turkey decades earlier, he was determined to drag Iran, kicking and screaming, into the 20th Century.

The way I got involved in all this was simple: Money. In 1975, I was 26 years old and a Senior Resident in Medicine at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. Johns Hopkins University smelled money in Iran. The Iranians wanted to buy American credibility. So, in the best of an unholy union, the University accepted large donations from the Shah to establish various collaborative programs. One of these was going to be an exchange program between the Hopkins Hospital and the Reza Pahlavi University Hospital in Teheran. I saw a small notice somewhere that if anyone wanted to become a teaching resident in Iran for a month or so, they should apply for it. I did. After a perfunctory interview with the Dean of the Medical School and some Iranian official whose name and title I forget, I was good to go. Everything was to be

paid for, including my airfare, lodging, meals, etc. And the best part was that I was given a grant of \$3000 per month on top of that for “expenses,” with no real need to account for how I spent it. (At this time my salary was about \$9,000 per year, which I was allowed to receive in addition to the grant.)

So, I scheduled my vacation for the month of August 1975 and told them I’d arrive in Teheran in September. I bought my plane tickets with a month’s stopover in Paris. I spent my month of vacation backpacking around Europe with my then-girlfriend, arriving rested and refreshed in Teheran on the first of September to begin my duties as an exchange student/teaching resident.

It was a strange world, to say the least. While I had traveled in Europe and South America and considered myself fairly sophisticated, I knew little or nothing of the Middle East. Prior to leaving, I’d bought books on Islam, reading them carefully and somehow coming to the conclusion that perhaps the differences between it and Christianity were little more than one might find between Baptists and Catholics. How little did I know. Having grown up in rural Georgia, I sort of assumed that folks everywhere were essentially the same. Retrospectively, I recall a chilling conversation I had with a medical student in Baltimore who had been raised in the Palestinian refugee camps on the Gaza Strip. He spoke freely of the ends justifying the means, and expressed disdain for the lives lost in the various terrorist incidents that characterized the early and middle 1970s. I should have listened more carefully.

I was assigned living quarters which I shared with a professor from Hopkins who was there with his wife. It was, by Iranian standards, a luxurious apartment. The floors were covered with hand-woven silk carpets, treasures that would have cost several years of my salary at home. There was maid service. Our food was—for the most part—provided, or we could eat for free at the hospital. I discovered that my assigned duties were relatively minimal. Basically, I had to show up every day for a couple of hours, and perhaps attend a few conferences if I wanted to. No fixed obligations. I had plenty of time on my hands, not to mention that the weekends were free. I was determined to learn as much about the country as possible.

In those days I spoke passable French, and that served me well. I learned enough Farsi (the Iranian language) to get by, traveling about the massive city that is Teheran, hanging out in the ancient bazaar, going to museums and teaching myself as much as I could about Persian carpets. On the weekends I traveled: North to the Caspian Sea, south to Isfahan and Shiraz. I

saw the magnificent desert ruins of Persepolis, the city of Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes. In short order I acquired a new girlfriend, an American woman working for an international engineering firm. She lived in the southern part of the city. I lived in the north near the Shah's palace. I hitch-hiked back and forth at all hours of the day and night to and from her place, flagging down cabs and private cars who, for a few rials, would take me in the direction I was going. Miraculously, I survived, negotiating myself out of only one bad situation in broken French and Farsi.

Despite my decidedly recreational bent, the hospital was the center of my interest. I met and came to know a number of fine doctors, and was exposed to the common people who by illness or misfortune had ended up in this referral center. I met Ladan and Lelah, the conjoined twins who at the time were about 21 months old. Their parents had given them to the hospital to raise, so they spent the first part of their life there. I saw strange diseases I had only read about in textbooks. I saw patients die, knowing full well that had they been at Hopkins we could have saved them. I recall writing home with the phrase, "Life is cheap here."



While unbeknownst to most in those days, the seeds of rebellion were quietly taking root in the countryside of Iran and the alleyways of its cities. I saw it, but didn't recognize it. I recall hostile looks from bearded, turbaned men as I peered into an ancient madrasa in Shiraz. I caught the occasional comment condemning the moral decay of America. The Shah must have known it; his regime had become increasingly brutal in its suppression of protest. His main adversary, Ayatollah Khomeini launched verbal attacks from his exile in France. The professor's wife—my roommate of sorts—saw it. She was of German Jewish background, having fled with her family to Switzerland in the 1930s to avoid Nazi persecution. She kept saying that Teheran reminded her of prewar Berlin. She spoke of the Gestapo, equating them to the Shah's secret police. She was convinced that we were being watched, our lodgings possibly bugged. I, too, sensed something, but thought her to be a bit of a paranoid nut. I

remember what she said, though: “Something’s going to happen here. Something big. Something bad.”

As for me, I couldn’t have been happier. Inflation had hit Iran, and the Shah, in true dictator form, simply decreed a roll-back of prices followed by strict price controls. In the many fine restaurants of Teheran I casually feasted on caviar that would have cost me two month’s salary at home. I swilled the best in Russian vodka and watched with fascination the belly dancers in the nightclubs. As an honored guest from America, I was invited to elegant dinner parties in the homes of the European- and American-educated elite. I especially recall one fabulous evening at the Minister of Health’s villa, where the rarified conversation would have fit easily in any Upper East Side brownstone in New York City. I remember eating twenty-year old pickled garlic cloves, a great delicacy in Iran I was told.

They gave me a small party when I left, with a gift of an incense burner which I still have and occasionally use. I flew home on TWA via Beirut, where we sat on the hot tarmac for hours as we watched artillery exchanges in the surrounding hills as the civil war surged around us. I arrived in Baltimore to find that my roommate, apparently not expecting me to make it back, had rented out my room in the apartment to some guy I’d never met. I kicked him out of my bed and slept for a couple of days. It was early October 1975.

The revolution began two years later in October 1977. Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Teheran in February 1979, and Iran was formally declared an Islamic Republic by national referendum two months later. Protestors took over the American Embassy in November, holding prisoner fifty-two hostages until January 20, 1981.

Such events, viewed on the television screen from far away often seem unreal. I had been there, but for me, yes, it was that way, too. Until one day at the height of the fighting, the



Islamic rebels trotted out another set of corpses to display to television cameras. There I saw, laid out with a huge bullet wound in his chest, the Minister of Health at whose home I’d eaten the pickled garlic. Then it all came home.

As for Ladan and Lelah, the conjoined twins, they “were lost in a hospital in 1979 after the doctors responsible for them fled back to the United States during the Islamic revolution,” according to Wikipedia. Years passed. In 2003, they surfaced again, now having

become lawyers. They were determined to be surgically separated, despite the grave risk to their lives. In July 2003, the operation was attempted in Singapore. It was unsuccessful. They both died.