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### An Itinerant in Iran: Part Six

May 2nd 1992 (Saturday) Turkmanchay

I had made arrangements to meet a couple of new friends from the hookah shop who said they wanted to take me to Torkoman (Turkmenchay), but they didn't show and so I went over to the bus station to book myself a taxi. It would be pricey but it seemed like a unique opportunity I couldn't pass up--here was the place where the Ruskiens defined their southern frontier after dictating the peace of 1828 to the crumbling Qadjar dynasty of Iran (the Safavids were long gone), splitting the amorphous thing known as Azerbaijan in two in so doing. No matter how dumpy a place it might be, not stopping in Turkmanchay for a budding Azeri-specialist would be rather like a Civil War buff not visiting Gettysburg while in the neighborhood or a Japanese tourist to the States not dropping in on Disneyland...

Gauging from the map, it looked like it was about 100 miles south of Tabriz on the Tehran highway, and then off in the hills a bit. But if determined in hours on the road and heart-beat/pulse-rate ricochet, it was considerably further.

Because the Tehran highway is an extension of the main European-Asian highway that crosses Turkey--a notoriously dangerous road packed with traffic of the most hair-raising kind: lumbering semi-trailer trucks, driven by Turkish and Bulgarian mad-men, strung-out on diverse don't-sleep drugs and hell bent on making the border before everyone else.

It was not a pleasant drive, this two hours of dodging traffic, and it was made less so by my constant interference with the driver's natural instinct to sneak our vehicle between trucks with traffic coming on. Worse, the driver spoke an almost incoherent form of Azeri--a sort of patois obsessive dialecticians might qualify as 'car-repairman hash, sub-district Tabriz, southern Azeri slur speech,' or something.

It did not make for good conversation or even a good road team: a bored, incoherent driver and a terrified, interfering passenger, almost unable to communicate a word with one another in a car with no radio.

Anyway, after wending our way along the Turkmenchay, or Turkmen River, we eventually ran into the sign directing us on to a lesser road leading up into the hills to the namesake town and, after about another ten or fifteen minutes, we pulled into town.

It was not pretty or quaint but I did not expect it to be so.

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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.

A farm town with a small interest in apple orchards and other citrus fruit, Turkmenchay sprawled down the slope of a hill, with sturdy houses set up every which way. Save for a main, rutted and muddy road that dissolved into a footpath about half-way through the town, there were no streets. Downtown consisted of a couple of dry-goods stores that seemed fairly well stocked, two photographer shops and a tea house that had a minor interest in collecting or selling carpets, it was not clear which. There was also a sort of fast-food stand somewhere near the tea house, because when we stopped in to chat with the guys, a sausage sandwich with all the condiments magically appeared for both the driver and myself. There were also two mosques, one old and one new. I reckon the population to be around 5,000, and judging from a conversation with one of the lads in the tea house, the place had just been incorporated as a town, or district seat, or something; for the first time, Turkmenchay was to have its own representative in the national parliament. Accordingly, the town was plastered with election posters, as well as a good number of other posters advocating a national literacy campaign.

It was a dumpy kind of place, but rather friendly and rather than it being difficult finding informants in Turkmenchay, they found me.

'Rus! Rus!' about one third of the 100 kids who instantly gathered around me began to chant, assuming I was Russian.

'Turk! Turk!' another third contested the judgement of their peers, suggesting I was from Turkey.

A few others decided I was from Shu'awiyah, which could mean that I was Russian or Northern Azeri, while a few of the more imaginative souls declared that I was a Bulgarian.

In any case, I asked my swarm of guides to take me to the old mosque--a logical place to start my exploration of Turkmanchay (or anywhere else, for that matter; the local tea house is also a good starting option).

The mosque was down a series of muddy lanes and by the time I arrived with my group, another group was there to meet us. Word had spread that a foreigner had descended on Turkmenchay, and it appeared to be almost as great and historic day in the contemporary history of the town as that fine day in 1828 when the Czar's generals had ridden in on the horses to carve out another chunk of empire.

I inquired about the Treaty of 1828 and someone remembered that there was something related to that event in the mosque morgue. This was odd, but I went along with the idea and entered the mosque itself, interrupting a few old men at prayer. They seemed almost happy to have the diversion from their devotions, and, informed as to my mission, the local imam produced a ring of keys and led me and a select group of lads into the morgue to see 'The Historic Remains.' (Tarihi Kalintilari)

Actually, the room or space I was led to was not a morgue per se, but kind of a junk yard space between the back wall of the mosque and the back wall of an almost-adjacent house where the imam stored his burial piers when not in use. The junk space was also cluttered with other debris of the usual, uninteresting variety: broken chairs, tables and shattered bottles.

But in the middle of the heap were The Remains--an old weathered tombstone shaped like the body of a ram with a truncated head and horns. The lettering was almost totally effaced, but I asked for a bucket of water to splash on it in the hope of increasing the contrast and being able to read something of the inscription.

In vain.

But one thing was heartbreakingly clear: The Remains were nothing more nor less than an ancient Akkoyun or maybe Karakoyun funerary stelle, the carved rock anthropomorphisms that one associates with the two medieval Turkic tribes known, respectively, as the White Sheep and the Black Sheep.

It had nothing to do with the Persian-Russian peace treaty whatsoever, and I had to wonder just how much history my interlocutors had been exposed to in school.

Why do you put the thing here, in the morgue? I asked the imam.

He said he was afraid that if he put it out front of the mosque, the authorities might take it away to a museum, or that locals might destroy it.

Destroy it?

Yes. There had been another stone stelle just like it, but local youths (and here the imam swung his suspicious eyes around the crowd of youths surrounding me) had believed it filled with gold, and smashed it open one night.

I bet there's gold in that one, too, said an anonymous youth.

There wasn't any in the first, I informed him, It's solid rock.



10th or 11th Century Stelle In Mosque/Morgue At Turkmenchay

The discussion about the merits of testing my theory went back and forth for awhile, until I decided I had had enough of hanging around the claustrophobic mosque morgue-cum-junk yard, whereupon I asked if anybody knew about any other remnants or physical hints of past, especially those connected with 1828.

Well, said someone, there is the Russian girl.

Russian girl? I asked.

Yeah, the Russian girl, a chorus of voices returned.

Well, take me to her, I said.

We flooded out of the mosque on to the muddy lane that served as the street again, and scarcely had we turned the corner going uphill than we ran into a most peculiar sight.

The Russian Girl.

Lady, really.

Well--Grandma, if truth be told.

She was at least 60 years of age, and withered, as the cliché has it, like a prune.

But she wore no hijab nor montó, and by her white hair and piercing blue eyes I am sure that in her youth she was probably a looker, and a blonde one at that.

Kak dila? I asked.

Atlichna, she replied, as if having a chat in Po Ruski in the middle of a crowd of 50 Azeris in Turkmenchay was an everyday occurrence.

I apologized for my less than perfect Russian, and suggested we turn to Azeri, but her mind was in Russian-lock and she would speak no other language with me.

Are you from Moscow? she asked.

No, from Baku, that is, the United States, Montana, I replied. How nice, she responded, understandably confused.



Gorby's putative cousin, resident of Turkmenchay

Well, I asked, where are you from?

Moscow, she replied.

Well, I continued in my line of inquiry, when did you get here?

Oh, in the 1930s sometime, she replied, My father Vasili was a kulak, a rich peasant you know, and Stalin had it in for him so he came here. One of my sisters got to Texas and I don't know where she is and a brother died in the USSR. You know anybody in Texas?

Yes, I lied.

Well, my sister's name is...

Either she couldn't remember or I didn't write it down but it was pretty unimportant anyway after I asked her name.

Maryam Pakomova Gorbachova, nee Marusa, wife of Rahmatullah Yakubzade, and mother of five kids: one daughter in Canada, one in Mashhad; one son in Turkmenchay, another boy in Isfahan and a third in Shiraz.

Slow down, sister! Whatchasay yer name was?

Marusa Gorbachova.

Any relation to Mikhail?

Of course. We are cousins. My father and his father are brothers, or were before they died...

Stranger than fiction if true.

Gorby's cousin camped in Turkmanchay!

By this time, there was a veritable swarm of well-meaning people trying to direct my attention to this or that Historic Remnant in town or across the valley; too many, in fact. So the sour driver and I fought our way through the crowd to the tea shop for a little encounter session there.

Once again, it was a friendly crowd although a little more controlled and less unruly than in the muddy streets.

What do you guys do around here? I asked.

Well, agriculture, most said.

Is it alright out there on the farm?

Not bad, not bad, came the replies. There were the standard complaints that one hears from farmers all over the world, but on the whole the coffee house crowd seemed to be content. They had their own land, they stressed again and again (the assumption being that I, hailing from Shu'wiyah, was ignorant of such things), and got to grow what they wanted on it and could sell that wherever they wanted for whatever the market would bear, but usually they just sold their crop to the middle-men merchants from Tabriz.

It was all quite friendly and low key and we all had lots of different questions for each other--what there was or wasn't in Baku, the war in Karabakh, what I thought of Iran--the usual.

Then I had an idea.

Excuse me guys, I said, I have a question to ask you.

Shoot, they said.

(You don't believe me so I will write it in Azeri:

Sonra, bir fikir esma gelip--ama lap original deghildi  
Bashlayin, beyler, dedim, benim bir sualim var.  
Bursunlar, deyiplar.

so there!)

Anyway, the guys gathered closer around the table and then I asked them:

Who are you?

Huh? came the reply.

I mean, how do you define yourselves to yourselves?

Still confused looks.

Let me give you a couple of categories, I pressed on, if you could rate yourself, how would you? First Azeri? Turk? Muslim? Iranian?

A crash of replies came rolling forth.

One by one I demanded, knowing full well that my sociological study left much to be desired.

Azeri Turk, said the first.

Turk, said the second.

Muslim, said the third.

Human being, slipped in a clever character, and chuckled.

Turk.

Turk.

Muslim Turk.

Azeri.

Not one said Iranian, and I asked why.

Iran, spat one farmer, Iran is for the mullahs, and we don't want anything to do with those traitors and thieves anymore.

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So we left Turkmenchay because the driver wanted to get back to his wife in Tabriz, but I induced him to change his mind by offering to double the price of the ride in order to take the long-way back, via the town of Maraghah on the eastern shore of Lake Umriyah (formerly Rezaiah, named after the Shah's father). I didn't want to see the same sights coming and going, and the driver was muttering something about a fantastic site left by the Mongols on the shore of the lake.

So we drove on over the high plains, defined once again by distant, snow-dusted mountains. There was not a tree in sight save for the birches in the river beds.

We stopped in some dorp of a town to buy about a kilogram of sun-flower seeds and a spare pack of cigarettes and ran out of gas outside another farm-town, but managed to cadge a few liters from a passing military vehicle and then made up for the favor by picking up six (count 'em, six) recruits hitch-hiking alongside the road. They were in high spirits and all wanted to talk to me about the delights of Trabzon and how much alcohol was available in Turkey. A few of the soldiers had been to Dogubayazit in extreme eastern Turkey and had enjoyed themselves a great deal.

Sadly, our running out of gas had delayed us by about half an hour and so, with light fading, we were obliged to rush through Maraghah without stopping in order to get to a bluff between the city and the lake in order to inspect the archaeological site. Maraghah seemed like a clean, lively market town, but I really can't say much more about it.

Once atop the bluff, the sun dropping into the haze hanging over the lake, the driver took me over to the site, informing me that it was the ruins of Genghiz Khan's son Kubilai Khan capital city, when the Mongols held sway in the area.

Fat chance.

Unless Mongol excavations resemble the Indian tent sites/circles that North American archaeologists so delight in, there wasn't much atop the bluff that could qualify for the term 'city.'

But what we did find was astounding enough: a partially excavated--or maybe, de-excavated--observatory, rather a smaller model of the famous observatory of Ulugbek at Samarkand.

The driver tried to convince me that sextant equipment--a sort of brick arch used to aim the star-gazing equipment--had been designed as a chopping block to execute prisoners. Leading me to a burial chamber half-way up the western slope of the bluff, he also tried to convince me that the man-made cave was a tomb for the Mongol elite.

I thought it more likely that the enigmatic chambers were more ancient, as they greatly resembled those of the Urartu kings at Tushba, overlooking Lake Van in Turkey.

By now, night had fallen and we had to return to Tabriz in the dark. It was a long, chain-smoking drive, and ended, sadly, on a sour note: while I understood the rate as gauged in Rials, the driver had understood it in Tomans--making my estimate one tenth of his demand.



Another Anti-Mullah Moustache Worn By Resident of Maragah

May 3rd 1992 Tabriz

I thought that this would be the send off day but it didn't turn out like that.

First, I had to change money to get back my passport from the hotel and I only had travelers' checks left (I am down to around \$100 plus a fistful of roubles). I don't want to exaggerate the problem of changing the checks because it wasn't really so bad, only a little time consuming: no bank but the Central Bank's main office could cash them, and the Central Bank would not because I didn't have my passport and didn't have the proof of purchase papers.

This presented a double Catch 22 because I couldn't get my passport from the hotel until I had paid the bill and the proof of purchase papers were safely tucked away in a drawer in Baku in case the checks were stolen and I had to supply their numbers in order to reclaim them.

There was, of course, only one thing to do: go to the director of foreign currency transactions and get him to accept the checks. Almost inevitably, he was American educated and apologetic about the difficulties of doing modern banking in Iran but was hopeful for the future.

On the <sup>way</sup> back toward the hotel to reclaim my passport I got stuck in the bazaar again--always a pleasant experience, and one where you enter at one end and emerge at the other some four or five hours later.

This time the cause of the 'delay' was my running into a carpet merchant who had studied in Tempe, Arizona, and who was amazed to see me in Tabriz.

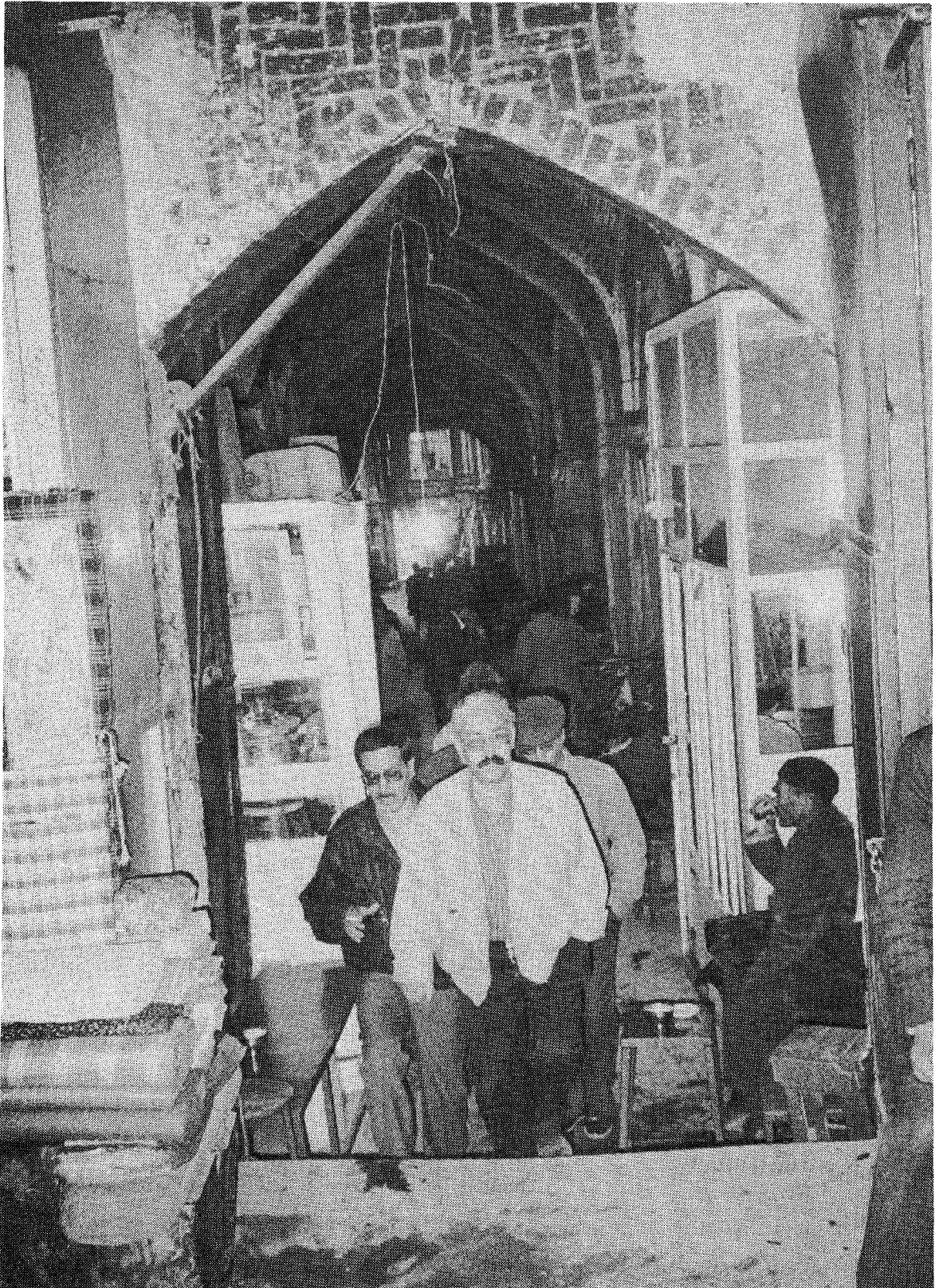
After several teas in his father's shop, we went out for a bazaar merchants' lunch of kebab and rice and then took a long swing through the vaulted lanes and interurban warehouses ('tichen'/hans) of the labyrinth, stopping in for tea here and there with a variety of merchants: shoe, textile, kitchen, rug, spice, cigarettes and tea and office equipment.

It occurs to me now that I haven't written too much about the Tabriz bazaar or even about Tabriz as a town, aside from using such adjectives as 'fabulous' and 'wonderful.'

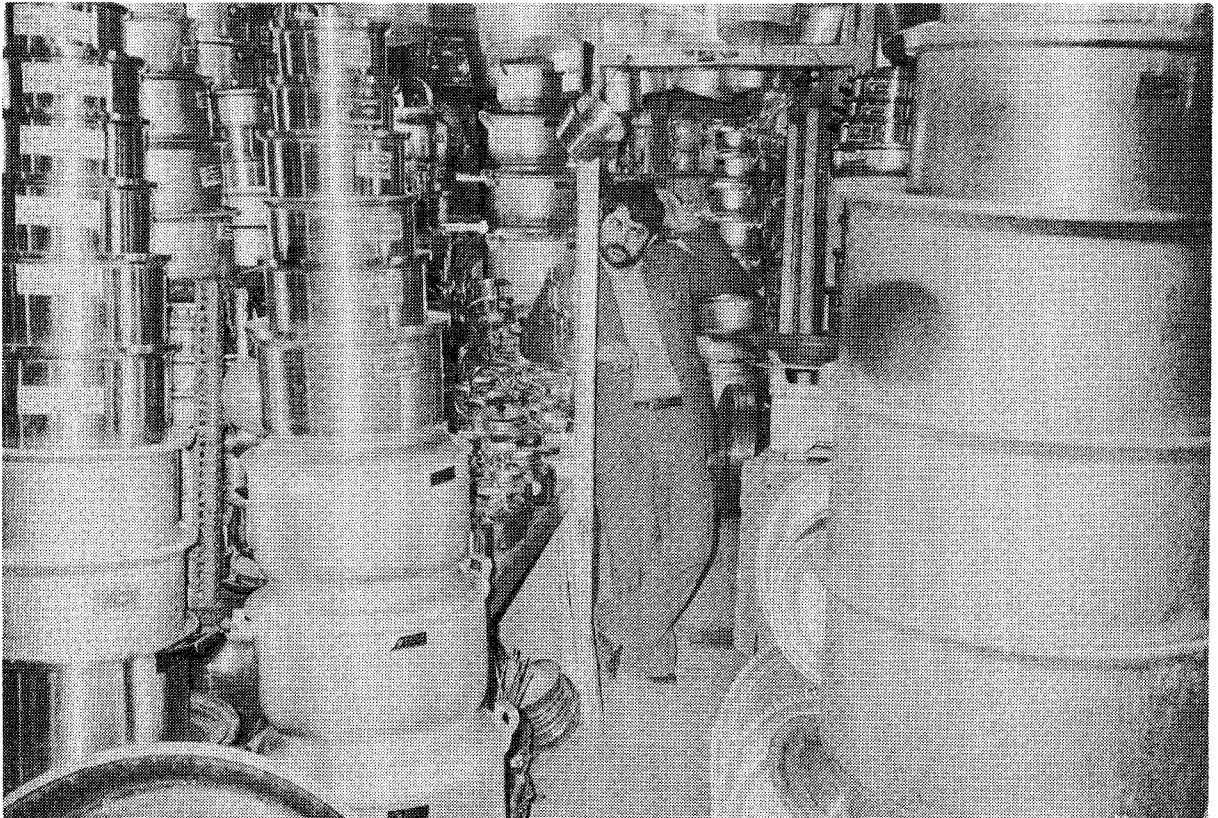
Well, in a sense, the two are identical because Tabriz is a great trading city and has been since at least the time of the 10th century Seljuk Empire. More to the point, the city's bazaar is one of the few traditional Middle East markets that has been left unsullied by tourist kitsch and unimproved by undue decoration and reconstruction.

It is exactly what it is: a web of small and large commercial establishments, fed by dozens of warehouses on the fringe of the web, which are in turn fed by myriad tiny workshops on the furthest fringes of the bazaar. There is little mystery about how it all fits together, although there is a beauty in the intricate web of relationships that needs to be experienced to be appreciated. Istanbul's Grand Bazaar may be glitzy and neat, and it does retain many of the traditional elements, as do the bazaars of Aleppo and Damascus, but the Tabriz bazaar preserves all the elements in a lovely, organic whole...

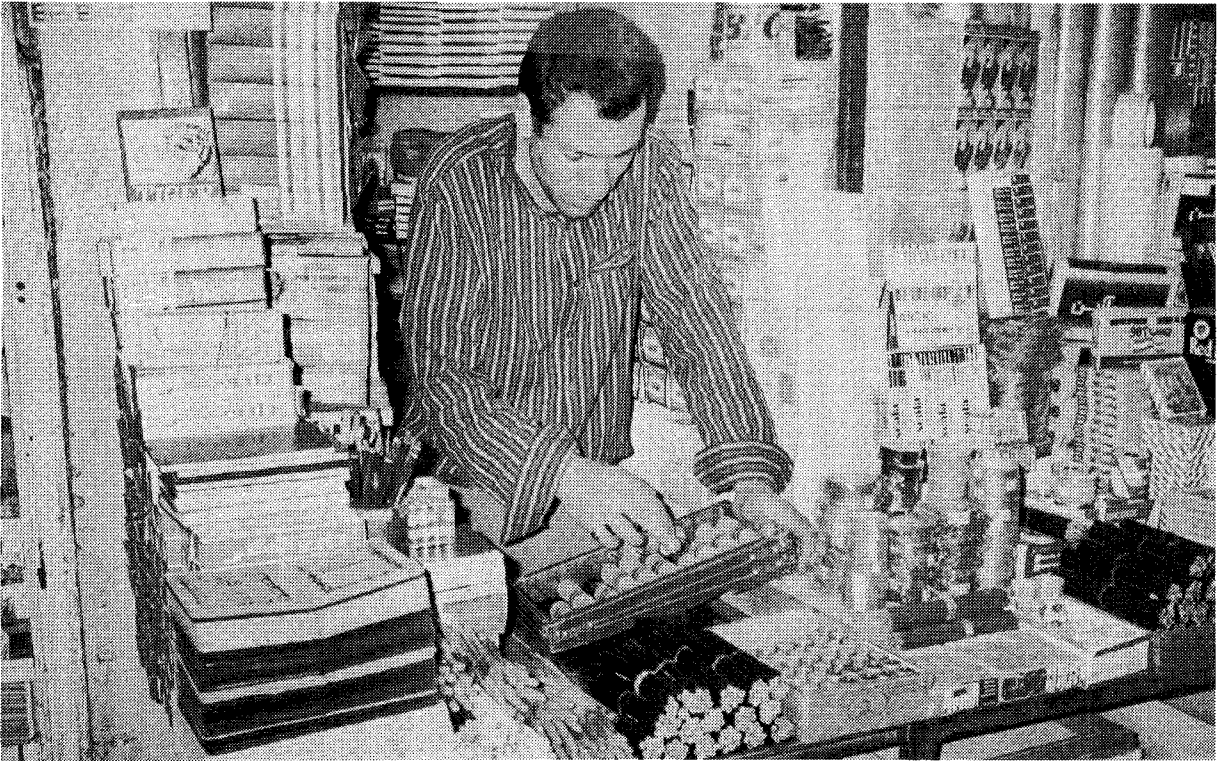




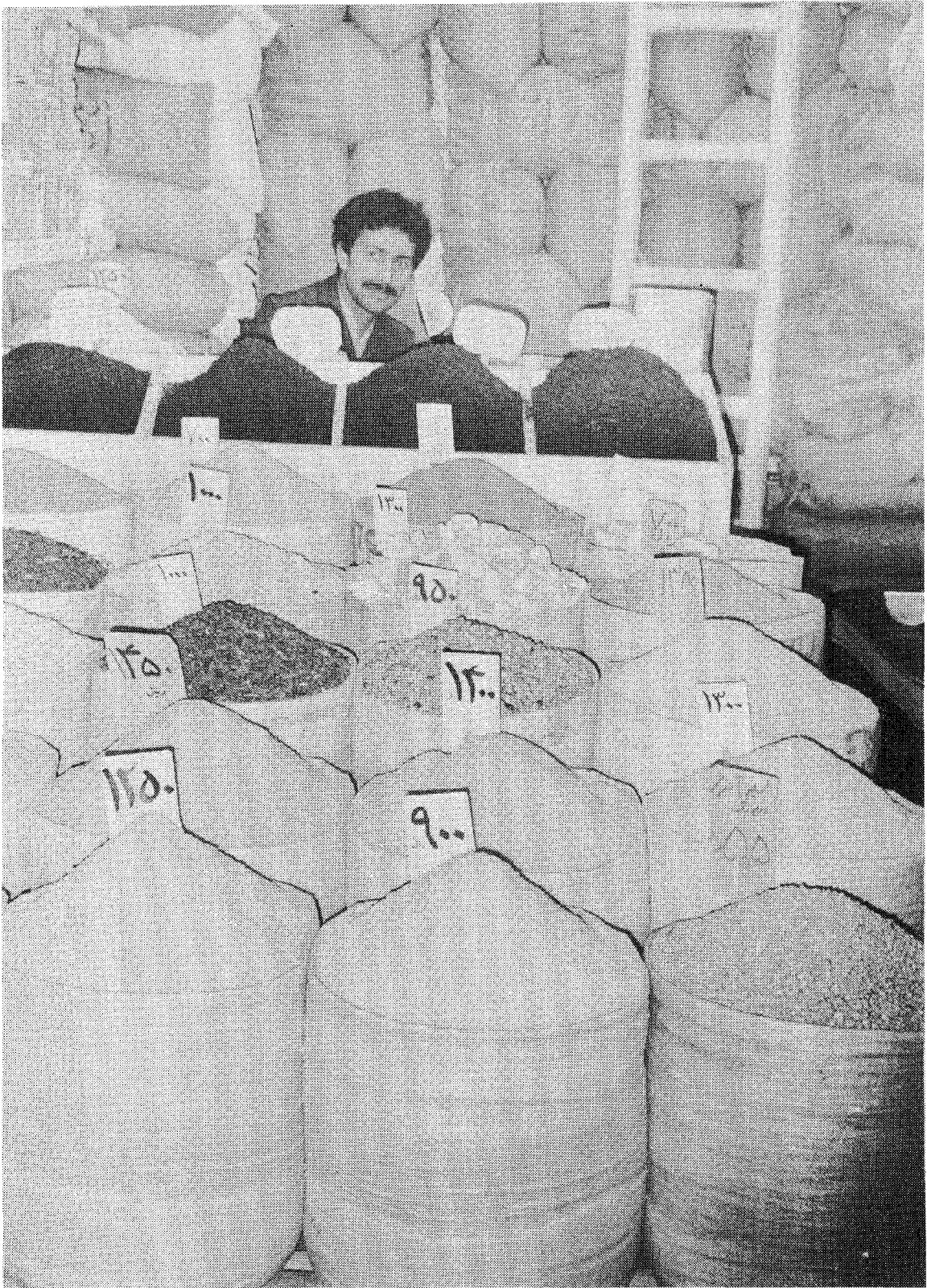
An Archway Leading Into A Han In The Tabriz Bazaar



Above, From Curing Leather and Carving Heel to Outlet, and  
Below, The Pot & Pan Man in the Tabriz Bazaar



Above, Carpets And More Carpets--And Not A Tourist in Sight, and Below, Tallying The Day's Take The Old Way At A Stationery Store



Dry Goods You Can Only Dream About In The Markets Of Baku



After Hours In The Tabriz Bazaar--Everything Buttoned Down Tight

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All through our tour, though, Ali the Rug Merchant kept trying to act as my translator.

This was irritating enough.

But then he turned to whining about having been refused a visa to the United States.

And every time he brought the subject up, more details emerged: he had changed his university once too often, and then over-stayed his visa in order to avoid being drafted into the Iranian army. He had also tried a marriage of convenience, but the girl in question refused to 'be bought'. Then he returned to Iran, married, had children and had taken on a job as a teacher with a salary of about \$150 a month in exchange for giving instruction three days a week. It was obvious that the rug business brought in a lot more bacon than that.

But now Ali felt like going back to the US to complete his MA in agriculture, preferably in sunny, southern California.

The problem was that he had the Black Mark of having over-stayed his visa stamped in his passport, so when he applied for his third entry to the USA he conveniently left the first passport at home. The US consul in Ankara smelled a rat and refused him a visa.

I thought of Riza, and had little sympathy for Ali.

And less when Ali became insistent about my helping him bribe officials or sneak through Canada or Mexico to California.

I suggested that he come clean and take up the issue with the US Department of Immigration. Then I said good-luck and good-bye.

The hour was late and there was virtually no chance of getting out of Tabriz to make the border before my visa expired and to get to Baku, as planned, in order to catch the final act of Turkish Premier Suleyman Demirel's pan-Turkic whistle-stop tour to Central Asia and Azerbaijan.

But on the off-chance that Demirel's schedule had been changed, I called the Turkish Consulate to ask about Bey Effendi's (Demirel's) itinerary.

The consul himself took the telephone and told me that due to the cancellation of the Turkish visit to Tajikistan because of unrest there, Demirel had already come through Baku the day before, and was winging his way back to Ankara as we spoke.

This filled me with a sense of relief because it removed any and all pressure on me to try and get back right away.

Then the consul told me that they were closing for the day, but that he wanted to have me over for coffee at five o'clock.

I duly went, was met at the door by a guard who apologized for having to frisk me and then was led into the office of the consul for a cup of Turkish coffee.

Our ten minute chat turned into a wide ranging discussion lasting over an hour. These are the highlights:

In Tabriz, less than 20 percent of the population had turned out for the April elections--and most of them, like my mosque-attending garbage men, had essentially been forced to go and vote. Boycott was the operative word. The reason for this was Tehran's equivocating policy about Nagorno Karabakh. Bootleg publications in Azeri Turkish (but written in Persian script) were rife throughout Tabriz, accusing the mullahs of favoring

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Christian Armenia against the blood brother Azeris. Well placed sources suggested that weapons and munitions seized and then sold by the Iraqi Kurds were being funnelled to the Armenians. (I thought of the bi-planes.)

And contrary to reports in Tehran, the Armenians of Tabriz had not dared march on April 24th lest violence occur.

Even Azeri mullahs were being effected by a sense of kinship with their brethren North of the border, and this sentiment was now rapidly spreading.

The consul had run into coffee-house situations where mullahs announced that they were on their way to the Shi'ite holy city of Karbala (in Iraq) if God granted them access; soldiers sitting at adjacent tables would reply that they only wished to be sent to Turkey to have a good time, if God granted them access.

I had seen much the same.

He was also privy to other political muttering. Why was Iran neglecting the Shi'ites of Iraq (even now being butchered in the marches outside Basra) and the Azeris of Nagorno Karabakh at the expense of supporting Palestinians in Israel? The people were beginning to wonder what the connection was and why Palestine was more important than kith and kin.

I told him about my mosque visitations and even being a fake Turk and he chuckled. He also had his own project in the works. Denied access to various parts of Iranian Azerbaijan for political/security reasons, he had recently devised a ruse that would allow him to travel as much as he wanted by the discrete selection of mosques in different parts of the country where he wanted to go to check out certain facts on the ground. The mullahs, aware that God is counting the number of mosques one prays in, could not deny him. Clever consul.

I am a believer, he told me, but I am also a believer in the secular mission of Turkey as conceived by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. I loved Ataturk before my mission to Tabriz, but I appreciate him 100 times more now.

Then he made me take a solemn vow that I would not publish anything he said in a newspaper and that I wouldn't even write down certain other things so all you get is this.

Then he almost demanded that I come back to Iran and spend some more time. He had some tips for my future explorations.

He also had a bottle of raki upstairs but I declined the kind offer. I would be in Turkey the next day, and could hold off for another 24 hours.

May 4th 1992 Monday (Igdir, Turkey)

I left Tabriz in the early morning and traveled West to the Turkish town of Dogubayazit and then turned North around Mount Ararat to the town of Igdir in preparation to crossing into the Azeri province of Nakhjivan. The trip was uneventful.

It was cold and over certain stretches it snowed.

Then it cleared and we drove through Maku and Bazergan between fine vistas of treeless steppe and distant mountains; the Ararat massif remained shrouded in cloud, however.

My taxi dumped me at the customs' gate, after which I was obliged to walk about a mile up-hill to the passport gate.

Kurdish kids--for this area of both Turkey and Iran is populated by Kurds--hung around the edges of the road, selling cheap Iranian petrol and oil to Turkish and Bulgarian truckers.

Then I spent my last Tomans on a quick meal and passed through customs and passport control from Iran into Turkey. I remembered other times when I had been on the Turkish side of the frontier, looking into Iran from across the Turkish half of the jointly controlled building, when the idea of walking across the line seemed dangerous or impossible.

But here I was, having ascertained that both of those notions were untrue. I guess its called 'exploring in some modern sense.'

The Turkish officials were friendly, and remarked on my passport. They hadn't stamped Yankee papers in awhile.

They asked how I liked Iran and were surprised when I said 'just fine.' They were also confused by my accent; so was I, having to make the (imperfect) conversion from Azeri to Turkish.

They were not the same language; close, but different.

My first, obligatory stop on the Turkish side was a Duty Free shop where I snagged the obligatory bottle of Turkish Raki.

Then I picked up a mini-bus connection to Dogubayazit, a Kurdish town in Turkey nestled under the shadow of Mount Ararat.

I had been there before--how many times?--mostly in connection with so-called 'Arkologists'; the fellows who believe they can find Noah's Ark atop the mountain.

In the old days, Dogubayazit was the very end of the world.

But now, it seemed a connecting link to somewhere again--Iran.

And there had been a lot of changes since the last time I had been there. There were automatic telephones. There was even credit card banking. I drew a bunch of badly needed dollars on VISA from a local bank. In Dogubayazit?

There were also Kurds.

They had always been there but now there seemed to be more, at least vocal Kurdish nationalists.

It felt a little like Iranian Azerbaijan.

Only this time I was speaking Turkish with Kurds, and not Persian with Azeris, and people almost resented the fact that I was dealing in their secondary language.

So I worked my way around the mountain to the town of Igdır, where I am now ensconced in a clean, cheap hotel, slightly drunk from having smashed down too many glasses of raki and pleasantly bloated by eating far more than my share of pirzola, or lamb chops. Last chance for haute cuisine dining (as it were) before returning to Azerbaijan tomorrow via the new, not-yet officially opened bridge and border gate at Sadarak to Haydar Aliev's fiefdom of Nakhjivan.

I think I will be the first foreigner to cross it.

The customs' officers I got drunk with say that there has been fighting there over the past few days between Armenians and Azeris, and that Aliev is trying to call in the Turks.

Welcome back home.

The End (for the time being)

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