

On Death and Burial in Isfahan

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It all began when I was director of the Asia Institute of Pahlavi University; then and now it is Shiraz University. The Asia Institute had been founded in New York by Arthur Upham Pope, a Persian art entrepreneur, before the second World War, but had folded afterwards. The Shah, however, in 1966 agreed to send Pope and his Institute to Shiraz in Iran. Now anyone who has worked in Iran, knows that nothing can be done in the provinces, since everything is centered in Tehran. In my five years in Shiraz new ideas were at once usurped by the capital, and bureaucracy there, to say the least, is most complex. Iranians say, that if someone says yes, it means maybe, and maybe means no, for no one likes to say no, to any proposal. After my tenure as the director of the Institute, on returning to Shiraz in 1975, to the local people it appeared scandalous for one who had been head of a center, and now was willing to serve as an ordinary professor. Yet my faith in the seemingly schizophrenic land, with opposite extremes, did not waver. Their rich culture was too strong.

Although born of Swedish parents in 1920, I did not have strong roots in various homes of America. Since I felt I had more connection with that part of the world, burial in Iran seemed appropriate. At first an archaeological site, called Qasr-e Abu Nasr near Shiraz, seemed a plausible burial site, but authorities vetoed that selection. Since gardens around the shrines and burial places of the poets, Sa'di and Hafez, seemed to offer little hope, a move to Isfahan, where a mausoleum on the banks of the Zayandeh River, containing the corpse of my former director Pope, appeared as a possible solution. A little Persian verse, as the tomb was being built, indicated concern by some Isfahanis. It read, "Oh, wise

one, get up from here and go to the cemetery; for this place in which you sleep is an abode of merriment.”

This was shortly before the revolution in 1980, which brought Khomeini to power, followed by the Iraq-Iran war. In as much as Central Asia, in ancient times was part of Iran, in a cultural rather than the political sense, a stay in Tajikistan appeared, especially when my good friend, Kamol al-din Ayni invited us to stay with him, in spite of objections of Soviet bureaucrats. By ‘we’, my wife Eden, and our eight year old son Nels, became the only Western foreigners living in Dushanbe in the winter. Needless to say the introduction of an American boy into a Russian language school, but almost exclusively with Tajik students, created quite a stir. Fortunately Nels’ Russian matched some of the Tajiks knowledge, but soon his English became a source of idioms for the Russian English teacher. My reputation, in no way equal to that in Iran, yet because of a memorial service in Dushanbe, for my friend Bobojan Ghafurov, former head of the communist party in Tajikistan, and then chief of the Orientalists of the USSR, helped me. It was the twentieth of December 1989, much colder than any former sojourn in Soviet Russia that I decided to go to Tajikistan. Since I was the only Westerner at the meeting in the opera house in the capital, it was well appreciated by the populace.

On the return flight, the plane landed in Orenburg, because of a snow storm in Moscow, and I had to pass the night in the airport. On the radio someone blasted Stalin, and even criticized the present government. It was among the first indications of *perestroika* “reorientation” which was to lead to *glasnost*, “openness”, and the subsequent fall of the USSR. But in Dushanbe we continued in the old style, with much waste, and ever diminishing articles in stores. Bookstores, however, continued to flourish, and the post office became overburdened with the books we sent home. Our first year, 1990-91, was beginning to show people leaving, when a friend Boris Anatolovitch Litvinsky, academician of Tajikistan, but who lived in Moscow, was able to secure much better quarters in the guest cottage of the geological survey. Nels moved to another school, also in Russian, but again mostly with Tajik students. Whenever

an orange drink appeared in a store, we would try to buy as much as we could for our son, but supplies were limited, and usually only one bottle per child. It was then that I was told, by Tajik authorities, that I could be buried in Dushanbe, in the garden-like cemetery, where Bobojan and Sadr al-din Ayni, Kamol's distinguished author, were buried.

When we returned after a summer in 1991, changes had occurred. Jews, who were mostly engaged in watch and shoe repairing, were leaving for Israel or the USA. Russians were returning to their homeland, and even some Koreans, who had cornered the dairy market, were going to China or Korea. Elections were to be held, and candidates spoke on radio, television, with posters announcing the various offices to be filled. The old guard won most of the offices, as many expected, because on the part of many a fear of the future. This led to complaints and street fighting, and finally civil war. We were fortunate in having, for a time, a young British reporter in town during that winter, Gillian Tett, later financial specialist for the Financial Times. We left Dushanbe and returned home.

In October 1992, since I had taught in Dushanbe, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran invited me to Tehran to lecture about Central Asia. I should mention that knowledge there about that part of the world was very limited. In fact years before, when a group of Tajik writers visited Pahlavi University, even a local faculty member was surprised that Tajiks, who were supposed to be Turkish speakers, had learned Persian so well! Likewise in Dushanbe students knew little about Iran, but much about Russia.

Even though "death to America" appeared on many signs, I only met with hospitality and friendship . . . It was then that the possibility of burial in the mausoleum of Pope was raised, but without any government reply. Since there was no indication of who was buried there, some people thought that this site might be one of an honored saint (Imamzadeh), and as a result coins were thrown through the lattice of the door, to pile up in the interior.

Superficially the hierarchy of the Shiite faith in Iran, with mujtahids and ayatollahs (learned men and super savants), may appear to resemble the

Catholic church, but in some ways Shiite philosophy is more akin to Protestantism, which is more open to change in beliefs. It is rather the Sunnis who have frozen their doctrine, since the time of al-Ash'ari (ninth century). Reason has traditionally been a factor of Shiite doctrine, although in many past times they seem to have almost to have followed Sunni practices. The Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, in my opinion, would be the end result of Sunni beliefs. This, of course, is a simplified explanation, for the differences are more complex. It became clear, however, that many Shiite savants in Qum were not like the ayatollahs of Tehran, who have tasted power, and are not open to any changes, either in their position or in doctrine, since secular affairs have become their concern.

Only burial, not cremation, is approved, for Muslims, and as soon as possible after death. The ancient Iranians, or Zoroastrians, used to bring their corpses to an enclosed structure on a hill to avoid defiling the earth, but that became impossible since vultures vanished, because of lack of any kind of carrion. It continued, however, among the Parsis in India. In 1976 in Shiraz, when the head of the university was a Zoroastrian, Farhang Mehr, at a dinner in honor of a Parsi doctor, a sophisticated lady from north Teheran sat next to him and asked in a slightly disdainful manner; "Is it true that you still practice placing cadavers on a raised part of Mumbai?" He coldly replied "Madam prefers worms?", which brought down the house!

I continued on my quest. After many trips to Isfahan the approval of the president Mohammed Khatami was secured, and both the mayor of Isfahan city and the head of the province gave their approval. Then elections brought Ahmedinejad to the presidency, so it was necessary again to make contact with him. This was not easy, and it seemed impossible, since obviously I could not have done it on my own. Fortunately a close friend in Teheran, whom I shall not mention by name, did all of the necessary work, such that it seemed now possible. It was in August of 2010, I gave short speech in Persian, wherein I explained my devotion to the cultural influence of greater Iran; the president not only praised me, but offered a house in Isfahan, where I could live until I died. This was most unexpected, and several newspapers attacked me saying a

foreigner should not be so honored. In any case, on Sunday 8 August my friend and I flew to Isfahan.

What a surprise, since I thought we were to visit only the mayor and others. Instead a group of local officials took us to Pope's mausoleum, which now had signs both in English and in Persian, telling who was buried there. Following that we went to an old section of town where scores of photographers and TV people waited, while I cut a ribbon and entered my restored 17th century house. I was given a deed to the house, but I realized that it was really the guest house for the arts and crafts people, and would revert to them after my death. If for some reason burial in Pope's mausoleum was denied, at least the best foreign and Armenian graveyard in Iran, here in Isfahan, would be my refuge. But the question of Iran and Islam arose. At least Rahim Isfendiyar Mashaei, the president's confidant, showed understanding, since he knows that rich Iranian Islam is not only spiritual, but never will intellectually follow the Wahabi or Salafist practice of reciting the Qur'an but not understanding it.

Since I have been accused of being a CIA agent by the hard line Keyhan newspaper, hopefully this will not prevent my return to Iran; at least Iranians know me best, not only for glorifying pre-Islamic Iran, but also showing them that Islam early changed from an identification with the Arabs, into a world religion, which was even more glorious in the golden age of Islam. Nasrollah, the head of Hezbollah in Lebanon said there is no Iranian civilization but only Islamic civilization. He is wrong, for Iranian civilization is what largely made Islamic civilization. Just as Greco-Roman cultures spurred Christianity, so did Central Asian and Iranian civilization do the same for Islam. So Iranians can be more secure in their 2500 years separation of church and state, and also in the knowledge that they made of Islam a truly world religion. Just ask the Tunisian Arab, Ibn Khaldun in the introduction to his world history.