

Tehran, Iran 1977

Pauline Fry
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The whirl of a helicopter high up on the ridge and then the mountain side was dotted with swift skiers, crying out “stop!” We did, literally, in our tracks. Digging our skis into the mountain side, raising our poles, we were frisked by the Savak secret police, ironically established in Iran with the help of the CIA to protect the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Clearly someone in the royal family was skiing that day.

I had arrived at the Mehrabad airport in Tehran in January, 1977 to teach literature (“The Modern Novel” and “Introduction to Literature”) to an American military unit for the University of Maryland. Military were billeted at the Hilton Hotel which surprised me until I learned that Conrad Hilton, Hilton’s founder, was a US Army veteran who’d served in WWI, so he supported military veterans and their families. I was given a room in one of the two tall towers that almost backed straight into the snow-capped Alborz mountains which ringed Tehran (and where I went skiing). The view was breathtaking.

Excited to explore the city, I ventured out the first morning after my arrival. It took about two minutes for me to hug the walls rather than walk in the middle of the sidewalk when men slithered by, saying things I am probably glad I didn’t understand. When I arrived in a huge square, I looked up at a cinema marquee. The title of the film was “American Babysitter” in huge letters. The woman on the poster for the film was blond & blue-eyed just like me, and being stared at by a snaking line of men waiting to get into the theatre.

As I recall, classes were held at the hotel. The knowledge I brought to my classes was balanced by the ignorance I brought to Iran. After that first shocking walk, I wore a scarf unless I was with other people. One of the most amazing things about teaching for Maryland—especially in 1977 in Tehran—was what students taught me outside the classroom!

My students were part of a small unit working with the Iranian military. Along with military students were people from Bell Helicopter. Why Bell Helicopter I wondered? I would find out that though Bell Helicopter’s headquarters were in Isfahan, almost 500 k’s from Tehran, a small local contingent was stationed in Tehran. But why Bell Helicopter?

We plunged into The Modern Novel. The novel that got everyone talking was *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton. I introduced Wharton with a quotation from her autobiography that I will never forget: “A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what that frivolity destroys.” Then we witnessed Lily Bart’s downward spiral. What I think students really wanted to discuss in those early classes held each afternoon after their shifts, was the confusion of the world they were now part of, part Iranian, part American, and far from the military bases they had come from. Some were suffering from culture shock.

I made friends with a couple working for Bell Helicopter, and they introduced me to a British engineer working for the Shah. (Actually, they were all working for the Shah!) It was through them, that I was frisked on the mountain side at Shemshak, a ski resort about 70 k’s from

Tehran. After class, we often went to one of several sophisticated restaurants on Pahlavi avenue (renamed Valiasr street after the Iranian revolution of 1979). Tehran was a cosmopolitan kingdom in the 1970's, and its restaurants catered to the local elite who preferred international food and western dress, and mostly lived in the rich northern part of the city.

As the weeks passed, I began to feel the underlying tension between the Americans and Iranians more. Thanks to the British engineer, I went to the Caspian Sea, an incredible drive through mountain passes and tiny villages. The natural beauty was unparalleled, the poverty shocking. The shah wanted more roads and engineers were designing them. Yet the engineer was worried. He talked to locals on his travels, and the resentment towards the monarchy was palpable, especially among the *mostazzafin*, the downtrodden.

Students seemed eager to be in class, perhaps because the modern novel seemed more familiar than the Iranian landscape. As our classes continued, I learned that Bell Helicopter was in Iran to support and train the Iranian military and to maintain over 500 Bell helicopters the Shah had purchased. One of my students explained that for every one-hour flight, a helicopter needs four hours of maintenance. Many of my students were part of that maintenance. Iran was big business for the Americans, and by 1977, there were 31,000 Americans in Iran.

For two months, January-March 1977, I was one of them. Often students would have to miss class, sometimes on a TDY (temporary duty station) to Isfahan; I encouraged them to read any chance they could, to carry the paperback novels in their pockets. To help them keep up, I assigned take home quizzes they could complete anywhere. These forced them to focus their reading.

Toward the end of The Modern Novel, Bell Helicopter student recalled Wharton's thought, "A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what that frivolity destroys." The frivolous society seemed to be the Shah's, but we only spoke about it through the novels we read, Wharton's and then Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the story of a man who tries to stop time, to get the woman he loves back; he creates a lavish world he hopes she'll step into and be with him. He thinks he can stop time. "He can't!" was one student's response. "it's too late."

When the term ended, eight weeks from the day I'd arrived, only one student got an incomplete, a small victory considering the amount of activity swirling around the Hilton! Classes had gone well. I was sorry to say good-bye to the new friends who had helped educate me, to the students who had, in the end, devoted themselves to the novel, the poetry, and stories we'd read. I left them in a world made tense by conflicting cultures, and gap between the well-off and the poor, themes we'd discussed in many of the writers we'd read: in Faulkner's south, Fitzgerald's West and East Egg, and in Wharton's New York world.

I looked up that world, later. It's no secret. In "The Shah's Americans," published in the *Washington Post*, Richard T. Sale writes, in 1977, "Iranian-American arms deals have totaled \$15 billion over the past six years, including expensive U.S. support-service contracts." Deals

were made, bribes accepted, and a lavish, frivolous life-style imposed by the reigning royalty.

The Savak who frisked me in February were their most violent between 1972-79 against anyone who criticized the regime. The Iranian people finally revolted, having seen billions of Iranian oil money funneled into the West. In January 1979, the Shah fled to Egypt. In February, the Islamic cleric , Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile. The Shah's pro-western society was erased, having ignored a more traditional society, which turned to the mullahs and clerics. The dramatic significance of this was a complete about face:

The Savak remained, now to enforce the "authenticity" of an absolute zealot. The Hilton was renamed the "Esteghlal" Hotel. Women were ordered to wear the veil. In November 1979 until January 1981, 52 American diplomats and citizens were held hostage for 444 days, after a group of Iranian college students who supported the Revolution, took over the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. The American-Iranian partnership was over, less than two years after my Maryland contract was completed.

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