A GLIMPSE OF LIBRARY CONDITIONS IN IRAN IN 1954/55

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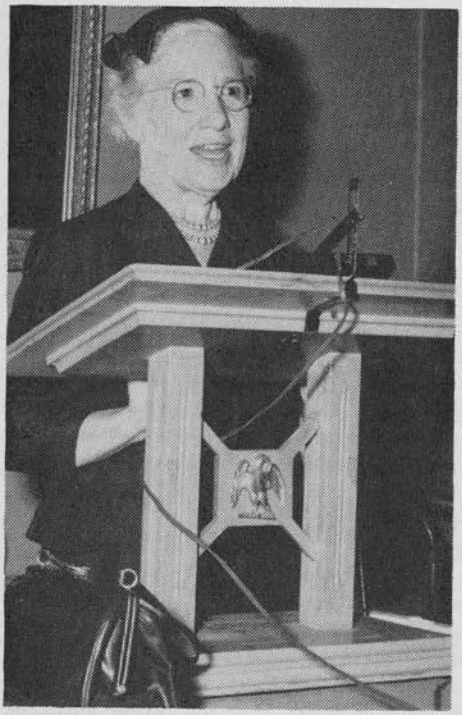

Before attempting to give you a brief account of my experience in teaching library work in Iran it seems necessary to try to outline the frame in which it was done, to tell you something of conditions in general in Iran. It is a beautiful country if one likes rugged brown mountains and desert and deep blue sky. Much of it is mountainous with altitudes varying from 4,000 to 12,000 feet, hence planes fly nearer the earth than in countries of lower altitudes; especially is thus true of Iranian Airways as they do not have the oxygen equipment to fly above 10,000 feet. Prominent in the landscape as seen from a plane are the underground water canals, *kanats*. resembling strings of giant ant-hills.

My work was done in Tehran, the capital, population, 990,000 and Shiraz, population 129,023. These population figures may give you an erroneous impression, if you have not been in Iran. One expects large stores with merchandise in general use by peoples everywhere, traffic control, etc. Small stores or shops abound in Tehran and there are many "sidewalk merchants." An extreme case was a young boy who spread out a paper or old cloth and displayed his stock of English walnuts in groups of three; having perhaps a total of 100 to 150 nuts. I once counted an old man's stock of cookies displayed on a tray, by which he sat. There were twenty-five. More ambitious "sidewalk merchants" have shelves which they fasten to, or lean against, a wall. Then they spread out their motley merchandise: perhaps a dozen cakes of palm olive toilet soap, a few boxes of toothpaste, bath towels, men's ties. At dark the shelves are lighted more brightly than the surrounding area by one or two oil lanterns hung above them from the wall. All homes and institution are surrounded by mud walls, 10-15 feet high, with a door, or in some instances a gate. So one walks along walls, with occasional glimpses into gardens and courts.

Tehran is in process of installing a water system, meantime open sewers (*jubes*) run through the city. The water, which comes from the nearby Elburz Mountains, is turned on at intervals during the day and rushes through these sewers. The Koran states that running water is pure, the poorer people use this *jube* water for all purposes. There are also many water carts in the streets from which purer water may be bought. The horses which draw the water carts frequently have blue beads strung across their foreheads to keep off the evil eye. Some have mane and tail dyed with henna or have henna spots

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painted all over their bodies. Henna is thought to give beauty and strength. Many women henna their hair or a lock of it. Some men henna their beards and hair.

In addition to the cars and horse drawn water carts, there are horse drawn *droshkies* (which are no longer the carriages of the wealthy but have become the conveyances of the poor for hauling such things as lumber, vegetables, or taking their families from place to place). There are a few handcarts and innumerable donkeys with feed bags around their necks and often attractively embroidered saddle bags or sacks on their backs. There are pedestrians and every now and then, a flock of turkeys or sheep, or a string of camels.

Many of the uneducated women of Iran, especially the older ones, continue to wear the *chuddar,* the long, full mantle which covers them from head to toe. Once I saw a woman in a *chuddar* having difficulty lighting her cigarette from a cigarette lighter while holding the *chuddar* across her chin with one hand. Tribesmen are occasionally seen with their head and waist shawls to use the language of *Haji Baba. Mullahs* with their flowing robes and turbans of white or black wound on their heads are numerous. The majority of the people wear western dress.

Traffic laws have been passed and are beginning to be respected and policemen are being trained. Streets are broad and paved, i.e. the avenues, or *khibanis,* which are intersected by narrow paved or unpaved alleys, or *kutches.* Electric street lights make the streets fairly light at night. Corrugated iron shutters, fastened with padlocks, are pulled down over windows and doors whenever a shop is closed, as is done in many countries.

Transportation and communication are yet in the early stages of development. Railroads connect a few of the larger cities, but because of their lack of suitable facilities are rarely used by foreigners. Railroad development was delayed by the pressure of other more powerful countries. Railroads running north and south would have suited the Russians and railroads running west and east would have suited the British. Each opposed railroads running in the direction which would have suited the other. Hard surfaced highways are recent conveniences. There is one running east from Tehran for at least thirty miles; another goes part of the way from Tehran south to Isfahan and Shiraz. Many roads are just trails through the sand. The larger cities have telegraph connections, but they are slow. A telegram sent from Shiraz to Tehran, a distance of about 450 miles as the crow flies, takes a couple of days. Mail is also very slow, but with few or no trains between points, poor roads, and planes landing only at a few of the cities, what else can one expect.

One of the things about Iran that strikes a newcomer most is the number of holidays which the Iranians observe. Almost all of them are connected with the Mohammedan religion and are solemn or sad holidays. One celebration goes back to Zoroastrianism, the dominant religion until Iran was conquered by the Arabs about 650. A.D. On the eve of the last day of the old year, which comes in March, the custom of building a bonfire and jumping over it to cleanse one of evil is still observed by many of the uneducated people of Iran. And the educated ones frequently give parties that evening and carry out the old ritual. On leaving the University of Tehran campus that evening I observed small bonfires burning on top of the two entrance pillars, and my interpreter explained that was because of the Zoroastrian custom. On the thirteenth day of the New Year practically everyone leaves his home for a day in the open and a picnic lunch. This custom originated in ancient times when the thirteenth was considered an unlucky day. It gives the evil spirits a chance to enter and leave the premises while the family is away.

Other holidays commemorate the anniversaries of the birth and death of Mohammed,

the birthdays of some of the twelve Imams, the birthday of the Shah. New Year's, *No Ruz*, is the happy Iranian holiday. It lasts about a month and seems to involve new outfits for each member of the family, or at least for each of the children; gifts for the family, especially the children; and spring housecleaning. The most solemn celebration is *Ramazan*, which lasts a month. During that time one fasts from dawn to dusk. This period, too, is observed by the uneducated and poorer people rather than the educated ones. The last day of *Ramazan* is a holiday of rejoicing. Planning a course of study in Iran involves taking cognizance of all these holidays and remembering that Friday is the Mohammedan Sabbath.

An interesting interruption to our library workshop in Shiraz was the five-day visit of the Shah and Queen. The Shah came to dedicate the Namazi Medical Center, the new cement factory, etc. The preceding weeks the city authorities and the Namazi Medical Center authorities made and unmade plans *ad infinitum*. Triumphal arches, with representations of Darius and other figures associated with nearby Persepolis were made, gilded, and hung with Persian carpets. Persian carpets were hung as decorations over the fronts of many buildings and spread on the steps, especially of those buildings the Shah and Queen were to enter. The Shiraz officials borrowed about a dozen of the OMI (Operation Mission Iran) jeeps and painted out the U. S. A. markings on them and painted on: Shiraz Police Department. (That was just to make a good showing. The jeeps were no doubt returned afterwards, but it was left to the Americans to have "Shiraz Police Department" painted out and the proper designation put on again).

Not only important Iranians came down from Tehran for the Shah's visit, but also important Americans from the Embassy and Point Four, so there were few available cars for the Americans working in Shiraz. Furthermore, taxis were not allowed on any street on which the Shah was expected to pass and this was effective for some time before he was due. Hotel Park Saadi (named after the poet, Saadi) was utilizing every bed; so I was asked (through an American who lived in the hotel, as Iranians do not like to do unpleasant things and would be embarrassed to ask me) to give up my room. I moved to the McAfee's who lived in a large compound across the river (river bed would be more accurate as it is perfectly dry for the greater part of the year). It was an interesting walk across the river bed from which mountains could be seen in the distance. I passed flocks of goats and their herdsmen, clad in typical eastern dress, and saw hordes of women washing clothing at a creek near the McAfee's.

All of the Americans were invited to the dedications, which included the capping of the nurses at the Namazi Medical Center by the Queen, followed by a buffet dinner in the garden of the Municipal Building. (Their highnesses promenaded through the garden and then went inside for their dinner while we had ours in the garden).

All things are done indirectly in Iran and one must go through proper channels. I was to be reminded of this many times. The State Department suggested that I go to Iran about the first of October, as the University began about the first of November and I should need to find out about conditions and make my preparations. On October 29th, at the conference which Mr. Angel of the U. S. Department of Archives and I had with the registrar and the professor in charge of the Institute of Library Science and Archives at the University of Tehran, we were asked if we would like to postpone the opening of our courses until later, so that we could invite our American friends. We said we should prefer to have the first meeting on the 30th as had been previously agreed.

The Institute was for only six months, but my grant from the State Department was "for not more than nine months" so it was decided that I should stay on if other library opportunities occurred as there is much to be done for Iranian libraries. The U. S.

Information Service Librarian, Miss Martha Guse, was told when she was in Shiraz in the fall that the Director of Education would like to see the staff of the Shiraz National Library have some training. In February the Director of the new Namazi Medical Center came to Tehran to ask Miss Guse if she could train a couple of girls on his staff to care for the School of Nursing Library and the library for the doctors. He also wanted help in planning for the equipment for these libraries, which must have the appearance of libraries when the Shah came to dedicate the Center. She and I went to Shiraz and during our brief stay the library-minded dean of the Medical Faculty of Shiraz brought together the Director of Education, the Director of the Center, some of the Point Four people to meet with us. The result was that I was asked to come down in May to hold a library institute or workshop.

Miss Khachaturian, Assistant Librarian of the U. S. I. S. Library in Tehran, an Iranian, went with me to Shiraz and served as interpreter and assistant. The Workshop was held in the reading room of the National Library. The library was closed so that we might use the room and all of the members of the library staff might attend the workshop.

We had twenty-one students. They were from the Namazi Medical Center, Shiraz National Library, Medical Faculty Library, an agricultural school, a school for teachers, and elementary and secondary schools. Their formal academic education ranged from a ninth grade graduate to one who had a master's degree, but the majority had only a ninth grade education. We brought mimeographed materials, which had been translated into Farsi; library films and filmstrips, which showed U. S. libraries in action; and some American books on library science. We offered three courses: library administration (which included one lesson each on the principle of book selection and on reference work), classification according to the Dewey Decimal Classification (as this system was already in use in a few Iranian libraries), and cataloging. Miss Khachaturian and another Iranian, who is especially interested in school libraries, had visited book shops in Tehran and made a list of the most suitable books available, for recommendation to school librarians. We distributed this list to the students and bought some of the books for the students to use in their work.

Our schedule was: class in classification or cataloging from 8:00 to 9:15 a.m., time out for tea (which we had with the Director of the National Library and sometimes his first assistant, there are always social gradations to be observed), practice work for about an hour and a half, a shorter break, then the class in administration. We adjourned at noon. At 2:00 p.m. Miss Khachaturian and I would come back to the library to revise the student's work and make the necessary preparations for the afternoon's work and that of the next morning. The students returned at 4:00 p.m. and had two hours of practice work in connection with the administration course. This might consist of drawing a plan of their libraries showing the location of the doors and windows and how the furniture was placed or processing a book aside from the classification and cataloging. Some afternoons we had only a short practice period followed by the showing of a film or filmstrip at one of the Point Four buildings.

Because the number of holidays in Iran equals the number of varieties of Heinz' pickles, in the three weeks' workshop there was only one period of five consecutive days of work. In theory we met daily, Saturday through Thursday, as Friday is the Mohammedan Sabbath. We were very much pleased with the interest of the students and the regularity of their attendance (not an Iranian attribute). Everyone came every day and practically on time, with only an occasional, unavoidable absence. The morning that the Shah and Queen and their retinue arrived by plane, we had no classes as we knew that,

following the Iranian custom, the students would want to go to the airport. To our delight they asked if they could come an hour earlier that afternoon so as not to miss too much work!

The books in the Medical Faculty and the Namazi Medical Center are American books, hence the students from those institutions necessarily had to learn to classify and catalogue books in English. Some of them read, wrote, and spoke English quite well; others knew little or no English. The students from the other institutions worked only with books in their own language, Farsi. I presented the topics in English and Miss Khachaturian interpreted them, which meant that most of the time I said a sentence or two, then she translated it. We wrote on the blackboard a great deal; dividing the board into two sections. I wrote in English, she in Farsi, with some good natured chaffing when I took more than my share, which frequently occurred as English writing takes more space than Farsi. In the practice work Miss Khachaturian took charge of the fourteen students who worked with Farsi books and I worked with the seven who used English books. When necessary I utilized as interpreter a student who worked with Farsi books but who taught English literature and spoke rather good English.

For the practice work we used the books in the National Library, a case of 99 paper-backed books which the U. S. I. S. Library in Tehran gave us. We could borrow books and periodicals from the Medical Faculty Library, a fact which shows the generosity and progressive spirit of Dr. Ghorban, the dean. Iranian libraries are just beginning to permit books to be taken out of the library. Books belong to the government, which is so centralized that most universities and schools are at least government supervised. If a book is lost the librarian must replace it, as he is personally responsible for all of the books. Another law which makes library service, as we know it, difficult, is that no book may ever be withdrawn from a library. This means that most libraries are crowded and many of their books are of no use. For instance, after borrowing medical books from the Medical Faculty one day, the Director of the National Library suggested that it would be much easier to use their collection which included medical books. Some of them were medical books in French published around the beginning of the twentieth century. Probably most of them never should have been added to the library and now they cannot be withdrawn. The fact that they were in French was an asset, however, for the French influence is so strong and of such long standing that many more Iranians can speak and read French than English.

The day after the workshop ended Miss Khachaturian and I visited the Agricultural School and a Secondary School library where students from the Workshop taught and had charge of the library. We found them already trying to put into practice what they had learned. The Medical Faculty has a fair library, many new and recent American books on medicine. It had been organized by Miss Khachaturian a few years ago, and she had persuaded them to have two copies of the most needed books and put one copy in the Reference Collection and circulate the other. In this way they were never without a copy of every book in the library. We found that they had re-arranged the room to incorporate the suggestions made when their plan was discussed in the administration course.

The basic idea in Iranian libraries is to preserve the material rather than to use it. The two laws which I mentioned above, one, that since books are government property the librarian is personally responsible for them, and the other, that no book must ever be withdrawn from the library, result in book collections which leave much to be desired and in a non-reading people. There seems to be a lack of mental curiosity, little

research work is being done hence very little reference work is done. So far as I could ascertain there are no national encyclopedias, national bibliographies. no handbooks.

In the development of libraries: first comes the writing of books and publishing; second, libraries with large enough book collections to include the many subjects in which people are interested or can be interested; third, collections freely accessible and publicized. The availability of paper of good quality and book binderies which do good work are also important. These things must co-exist and progress together. Furthermore school, college, and university libraries are not really necessary if the method of teaching is the use of one textbook or the lecture, especially if the results are measured by examinations based upon the memorizing of the textbook or the notes from the lectures. In Iran for about a month at the end of the academic year college and university students and probably secondary school students as well walk up and down the campus or park walks, along little-used streets and alleys memorizing their notes. Changes in teaching methods are necessary if the books are to become a vital part of education. If one cannot read, reading is neither a recreation nor a source of information and ninety per cent of the people of Iran do not know how to read, though today a good deal is being done to remove illiteracy throughout the country. Educational facilities must be provided; elementary education, at least, must be compulsory; and books must be freely available if a nation is to become a nation of readers.

When one looks at a map of the world and sees the very small portion which is occupied by Europe, the British Isles, the United States, Australia, and Canada as compared to the huge continents of Asia and Africa; and remembers the small proportion of the population of these latter continents which is literate, one begins to realize, especially if one is a librarian, how great is the problem of having an enlightened democracy; how tremendous the task of providing information for the people everywhere (having first taught them to read).