

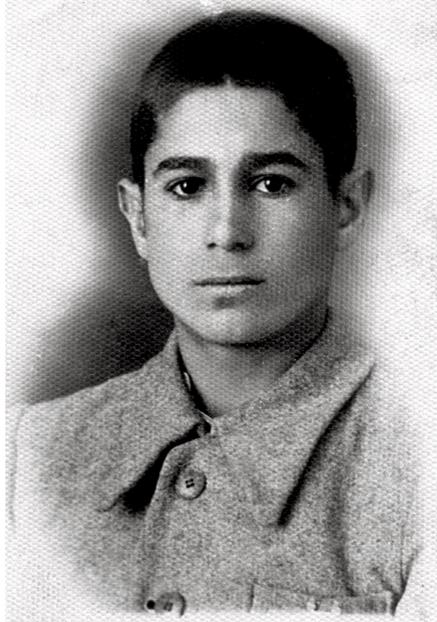
# Early memories

*Esmail Bazargan*



In the past, while chatting with my friends about my memories, Kaveh, who was a small child, would listen. Now that he is a grown man and I have reached the age of 80, he is insistent that I write down some memories of my youth. I have resisted this request for several years, because in my mind I do not think they would be of much interest, but as Kaveh has insisted on this for two or three years, I shall try and write down whatever I can remember.

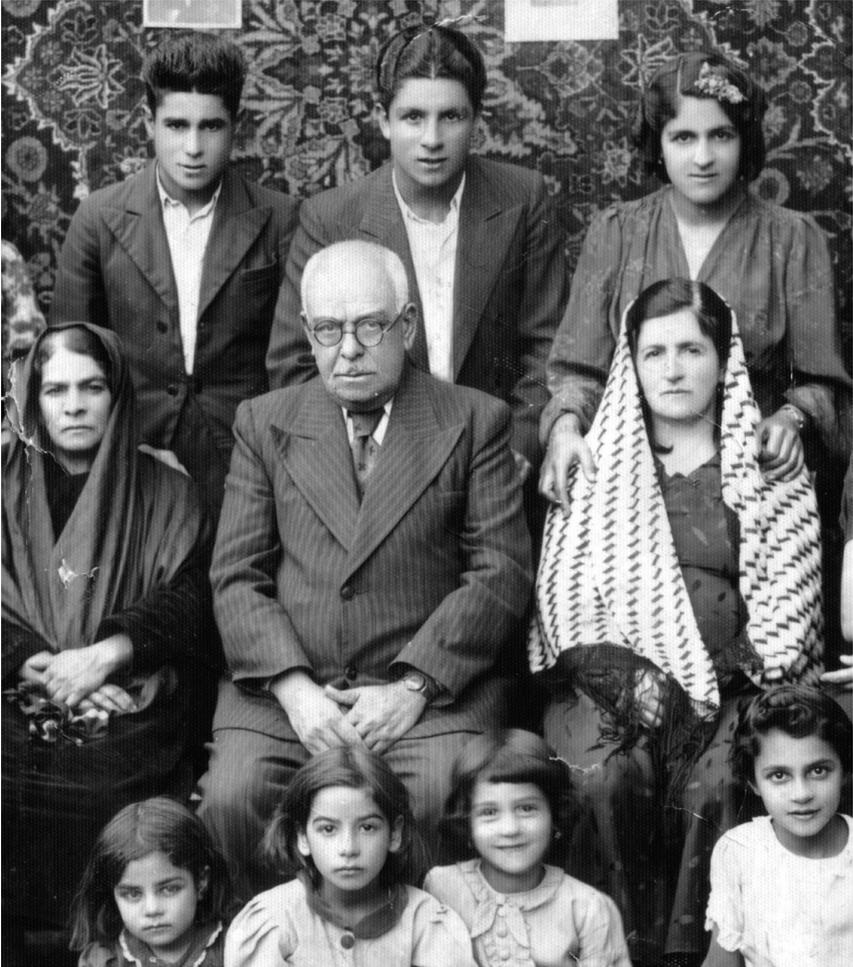
When I was in the final years of high school, i.e. in the fifth grade, and within two years of graduation, I was constantly contemplating what I would do after leaving school. In those days the only university was in Tehran, and at the time (i.e. 1943–4) the second World War had not ended, and the cost of living was extremely high. Consequently my father did not have the financial ability to send me to Tehran for further studies. My only hope after graduation would have been to be employed at the Melli (National) Bank, which in those days was one of the best positions available for those with good education. Yet this was not an attractive option for me. One of the reasons for this was that my maternal grandfather in Mashhad was Dr Boghrat (literally Hippocrates) who was one of a handful of Doctors in the city. I was his eldest grandson, and was studious, and for



*At school*

this reason he was attached to me and would often tell me that I should become a Doctor and then manage his surgery.

As an aside I want to give an idea of life in those days. My grandfather, Dr Boghrat, had two wives and owned a large piece of land in the "Chaharbagh" district of Mashhad. In the centre there was a large courtyard, within which he had constructed a large building, and that constituted his surgery. He had then constructed two further large buildings on either side, with



*Dr Boghrat flanked by his two wives. Esmail top left.*

independent courtyards, each of which belonged to one wife and her children. The three courtyards and the enclosed buildings were completely separate and independent, but they were connected by paths. My

grandfather was keen to maintain equality and justice between the two wives, and his solution was to spend alternate nights at each house! At the house that he was staying the respective wife would cook fresh rice, and the other wife would have simple food. In each house he occupied the best and the most grandiose room.

The only university was in Tehran, having been built by Reza Shah around 1933–4, and gradually completed. Before that, i.e. around 1928–9, almost all medical students were sent abroad. So when I graduated from school, in order to continue my education and go to university, the only way was to go to Tehran. Around 1941, during the second World War, Iran was occupied and the cost of living was very high. For most fathers it was not possible to send their son to Tehran and pay 150 Toomans a month, and my father was in that group.

In 1943, while I was in the fifth year of secondary school, it came to my attention that the army was funding a select number of students to sit the university entrance exams to the technical and medical universities, and would pay their university fees. So from day one the students would reside in the military academy. After two years they would become officers, receiving an officer's salary. I was excited to hear about this possibility, as without this scheme, I would have to stay in Mashhad

and become a bank employee, a prospect that would not satisfy me – possibly because my grandfather, Dr Boghrat was one of 5–6 doctors in Mashhad. It should be said that the doctors' knowledge was not at university level, as there had been no universities to speak of. They would have travelled to Tehran for two or three years, undertaken some basic studies, then returned as doctors. At the time I was the eldest grandchild and a boy too, and because my schoolwork was generally good, he always repeated that I should become a doctor and manage his surgery after him. After school I would often go to his surgery to greet him and would see how he worked.

In any case, the fact that Tehran University offered some studentships to the army, offered a major opportunity to students living in other cities, who could not otherwise have studied in Tehran. At that time, the Faculty of Medicine received 1000–1200 applicants, but had only 100–120 places. Naturally those with the highest marks would be selected. So I started to study Physics, Chemistry and Biology, as there would be three questions in the entrance exam, one in each of these subjects. As this was a vital issue for me I left no page unturned, with the result that amongst 1200 applicants I came 40th. So in September 1944 I passed the entrance



*At the Military Academy.*

exam to the Faculty of Medicine. This was a great achievement for me. During the university studies we would stay in the officers' dormitory, and go by bus to the university and return at dusk.

The reign of Reza Shah collapsed in the years after 1941, and there was a military occupation by the Soviets and the British. Political prisoners and communists who had been in jail during Reza Shah's reign were released. As

there were 53 communist prisoners, they became known as “the 53”.

As stated above, 1943 was when medical and technical students started entering the army. The commander of the technical students was Khosrow Roozbeh, who was a handsome, highly literate man, having published numerous books on military matters, and technical aspects of the artillery, and even a book on chess. His technical and artillery books were used as teaching material in the university. All in all he was a highly likeable and respectable man.

While at the academy we travelled in the morning to the medical school, and back to the military academy where we stayed the night. Roozbeh was the Commander for the students who had been admitted to the technical university. These students travelled back and forth as we did, so during the day we were in constant touch with Roozbeh, and under the influence of his personality and his good nature. We liked and respected him enormously and there is no doubt this was the feeling of all the officers in the military academy.

When Roozbeh was released from prison (after August 1941 and the exile of Reza Shah to Mauritius) the pro-communist and pro-Soviet “Tudeh” party was

created, supported by many young people. At the time, the Soviet Union had a good reputation within underdeveloped countries, in particular among the educated sector. When the Soviet army entered Iran, the locals thought that they would be a pathetic and hungry lot, and that they would pester the local population – this was far from the truth. (It is amusing to note that in the summer we used to travel to the Saraasia resort, near Shandiz, Mashhad. When the Soviet army were based in Mashhad, the villagers would hide their best samovars and crockery in far-away wells, afraid that the Soviets would steal them. This might be hard to believe, but I witnessed it myself in Saraasia.) But when the Soviets arrived they did not bother the locals at all. They were very polite and were content with whatever they had. This behaviour was effective in changing the minds of the locals who thought of the Soviets as plunderers. For this very reason, when “the 53” were released from prison and formed the Tudeh party, pleading allegiance to the Soviet Union, a significant section of the population were sympathetic and supported them.

Captain Khosrow Roozbeh was one of the supporters of the Tudeh Party, and as we were constantly with him, at the military academy and at the medical school, we were influenced by him. Having been extremely fortunate to

have passed the university entrance exam, and instead of becoming a mere government employee, becoming an officer and a doctor, I now became interested in Khosrow Roozbeh and the way of Communism and the Soviet Union. And the more I read their books and newspapers, the more fascinated I became. This was the period towards the end of my first year at university, and the upshot was that when my first year ended I officially joined the Officers' Corps of the Tudeh Party. We had regular meetings and read books.

Now I was faced with a problem, namely that I was a religious individual. Even in the military academy I prayed regularly, and was one of the very few who fasted during Ramadan. I had heard that Sheikh Sanglaji was a well known expert and religious luminary and that it was possible to consult him. On Friday mornings his house was open to all and some dignatories would always be visiting, asking him questions and taking part in discussions. So for several weeks we would go to his house on Fridays and would listen to the dignatories and other well informed participants. Finally, one day after everyone had left, I stayed behind and told him that I had always been a believer and prayed regularly, but now I was losing these beliefs. We discussed this together for around 10–15 minutes. In the end he told

me that I could act as I thought was right, and gave me a formal Carte Blanche, allowing me to put aside religion with ease.

At this juncture, it would be good to tell another story about religion: Alireza Aryan, was the elder brother of my friend, Dr Aryan. At high school he was excellent at mathematics. After obtaining a mathematics degree and teaching for several years, he went to France to study for a PhD in Physics. He had absolutely no religious beliefs, but when he met Dr Shariati in Paris, he fell under his spell, gave up his PhD research, and returned to Iran, and highly religious. When I heard about this I thought that a person with such an excellent mathematical brain would not easily accept religious beliefs, and so there must have been a good reason and logic behind his transformation. This was around 1961 and I was in Bojnord. I closed my surgery for a few days and went to Mashhad, obtained Alireza's address from Dr Aryan, and went to his house in Tehran. We talked a lot, but I was not convinced. In the end he said the best way for me was to read the Koran each morning and not to mix with non-believers, but only to mix with religious folk, and that way I would become a believer. After that point, with a clear conscience, I came to terms with my own beliefs, and to this day I comfortably believe that God



*With friend and fellow officer, Nasser Majd, and other friends. Majd became Ambassador to Japan and remained a lifelong friend.*

and religion are inventions of man. Regarding the world and the planets, mankind, animals, and thousands of other things, I believe that we do not know how these were created, but only in order to pretend that we do, we convince ourselves that God created them, only to satisfy our own curiosity.

Let us return to the main subject which is Khosrow Roozbeh and the Tudeh Party Military Organization of Iran. At the end of the first year of university, of a total of around 40 military students, 6–7 of us had joined the Party, and a similar number for the technical students.

Of course the Party was completely underground and none of us knew any of the others, unless we were in the same cell. Simultaneously with our studies we undertook Party activities too and roughly every two weeks we would set up a meeting to discuss politics. This continued until 1950 when I graduated and took up my military post in Mashhad, and from there I was sent to Bojnord. In the Bojnord garrison I was the sole Party officer, and therefore I did not set up meetings and had no Party activities, save for my own private studies on the Tudeh Party.

In March 1954 I had gone to Mashhad and perhaps with no plans to get married, I met Giti through Dr Afshar and his wife Simin (Giti's elder sister), and within a week we were married. In the summer we had a wedding celebration and Giti came to Bojnord. As it happened, in the summer, specifically in August 1954 our Party was discovered by the Shah's regime and the notebook containing all the names fell in the hands of the army. However the members' names and details had been written in a "trigonometric code" and it took about a month to decode it by using torture on the Party leaders. On 7 September 1954 all members of the Party, of which we were 4-500, and scattered in garrisons all over Iran, were arrested and taken to prison. As it



*At the wedding, Giti wearing a dress she made herself*

happened Giti was pregnant with Kaveh at this time and we did not have any contact for 2–3 months – I cannot remember where I got the message that Giti was carrying Kaveh.

I was a Captain, and in charge of the garrison clinic. I



was arrested and the same night driven with Giti to Mashhad in a military ambulance. (In those days there were few cars and Bojnord did not have taxis or rental cars.) I was delivered to prison and Giti went to Dr Afshar and Simin's house.

In Mashhad I was one of around eight officers who had been arrested and imprisoned. In fact, we were in an empty workshop in the garrison, and each of us were kept in a separate room. The doors were always locked and my suitcase and water jug were in the hallway outside. If I needed anything, even to drink water, I

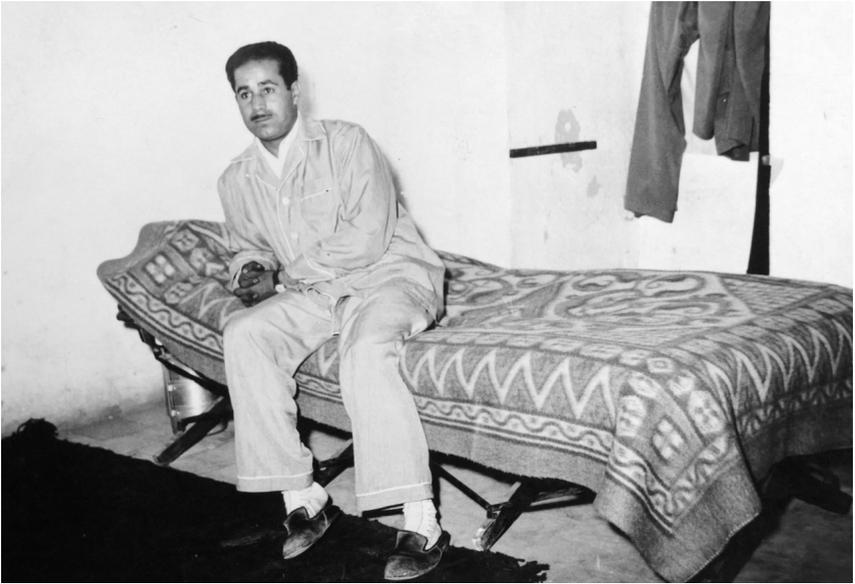


*Newspaper clipping the arrests – Esmail 2nd from left*

would have to knock on the door and wait for the guard to open it. I had taken a folding bed and bedding which were in my room. The room had no heating and I remember that the weather was so cold for a few days that I had to spend almost 24 hours in bed. After some 3 months we were taken to the communal soldiers' bath in the garrison – this was the first time we saw fellow arrested officers. There were only a few of us, and rather than washing, we found ourselves talking and updating ourselves of any news. I am mentioning these to let you know the conditions we were kept in, and the kind of treatment we received. Of course we were still in a relatively good phase; interrogations had not yet begun – these were often accompanied by intense and

unbearable torture. After some 3–4 months we were suddenly informed that we would be taken to Tehran the next day. (Do read these and note the treatment that the “right-thinking” opposition received during the reign of the Shah, whom some people are now praising .)

The next day we were taken to Tehran, along with our meagre possessions, in two trucks and accompanied by a large number of soldiers. To prevent us escaping during the whole trip each prisoner had one hand chained to that of another. In parallel, our families travelled to Tehran by bus, so we all got there together. (Now Giti was 4–5 months pregnant.) We were taken directly to “Ghezel Ghal’e” prison and locked up in individual cells. I estimate that the ceiling of the cell was only 25cm above my head, and when I slept, the length of the room was only a little longer than my height. The door was always locked from outside and we were taken to the lavatories once before dawn and once at 7–8pm. After 3–4 weeks, they transferred us to Ghasr Prison where other officers were held. They took two of us to a room where 7 other comrades were held. All the rooms opened onto a corridor and were always locked from outside. The door had a hole 5x10cm in size, through which the guard would look into the cell and keep an eye



*Prison cell*

on us. We were in this situation for 1–2 months until we were taken for interrogation and investigation. During the interrogation, slapping and kicking were quite routine, but this could not be considered torture, in comparison to the real torture that others were enduring.

On the way to interrogation, when we met comrades who had been interrogated, they would say that if we were asked whether we were communists, members of the Tudeh Party, or opposed to the Shah, we should not



*In Ghasr prison with fellow arrested officers*

try to resist, as we would be beaten and tortured to such an extent that we would eventually give in and even write down whatever they demanded. Colonel Moshiri (I think that was his name) who was high-ranking officer in the Party and a highly honorable man, was tortured severely but did not speak. One day when in the bathroom he managed to cut his wrist. As it happened, the guard saw him through the peephole and took him to hospital just in time to save his life. In the first four months that we were in Ghasr prison we never saw the

colour of the sun and our skins were totally pale.

Regarding our families, words are not enough to praise them. They were so very loving that they were constantly thinking of us. I believe this is because they knew us to be essentially a healthy, sane and tolerant lot. We never took part in corruption or stealing (although this behaviour was common amongst officers). We all lived within our means, and none of us had much money.

After I had been released and went back to Mashhad, Dr Aryan gave me a letter that Giti had written. Apparently a friend in Mashhad, namely Dr Mirshahidi had spread the word that Giti is about to ask for a divorce, as Dr Bazargan has been convicted to 15 years in jail. Giti had written to Mirshahidi (who was actually a friend of mine) telling him that firstly, if he is a friend of Bazargan, then he should not be spreading rumours; secondly, for his information, those two months that she had spent with her husband were sufficient for the rest of her life, and even if he were convicted to life imprisonment she would await him. (Aryan did give me that letter but somehow I lost it.)

The doors to the prison cells were open and the prisoners of 7–8 cells together in a group were allowed to have their families visit, bringing fruit or food, and

collecting clothes to wash and to return the following week. We kept the fruit and the food that the families brought over in one place, and all prisoners were free to help themselves. I remember that one comrade who was in charge of collecting these fruits and sweets and keeping them in one place, would always show me the package or basket that Giti had brought and would say that the neatest and most attractive baskets were hers – for example a basket of fruit would have some jasmine flowers tastefully sprinkled on top.

It is not out of place at this juncture to remind myself that one of the biggest fortunes of my life was getting married to Giti, who has been a woman constantly thinking of her family, an outstanding and extraordinarily loving mother for her children and a sincere and true wife, to whom I will always be indebted. I hope that I have been able to make some recompense for all these blessings. I remember that when I was convicted to 15 years in prison, my only possession was a piece of land in Abbas Abad in Tehran, which had been donated to me by the army. It was around 7–800 square metres in one of the most sought after locations. I had arranged to transfer this land to Giti to put it in her own name. At this time when she had come to visit me with her mother, I told her that I had been convicted to 15

years and it was unclear when I might be released, and told her that she was free to ask for a divorce, so that her youthful years would not be wasted. But she did not reply and she never made such a request, and she sincerely supported me during my entire time in jail.

After the conviction of the prisoners and the end of the judiciary process, for a while all prisoners were together and enjoyed a pleasant period, following more or less a general programme, which continued throughout our time in prison. First of all there were sports, so we would go into the yard one or two hours every day to walk and to exercise, and the rest of the time we would chat. But the majority of the time was spent studying. The doctors and medical students would study medicine, but almost everyone studied languages. This is because a number of our officers had been abroad and knew a foreign language, so each would set up a class and teach others. I had studied French in high school and university, so I started English and that is where I finished the four volumes of “Essential English”. To sum up, we never wasted any time. After a year and a bit, one day when all the prisoners were together, we were informed that General Hedayat, who had the highest office in the army, was coming to prison to talk to us. The essence of his speech were captured in these, his exact words: “You

were the best and the most honorable officers and we could not satisfy you, so the Tudeh Party stole you from us. Now, his Imperial Majesty wishes to pardon you. Therefore I ask that you to promise not to continue your previous ways – you have already been punished. Then I shall beg his Majesty to forgive you.”

The next day we saw him bring a large number of copies of the Koran and we were asked to sign them, and to vow not to follow the politics we were involved in. So every 10–30 people signed one copy. On 26 October 1956 the a sizable group were released and gradually all were released within 5–6 years, save a few who stayed until the 1978 revolution (having refused to sign).

The prison cells usually housed 6–14 prisoners. Each group of cellmates would organize life amongst themselves. I had forgotten a few things... For instance when supper was ready, one person from our cell would take a dish and bring back food for 6, say “adas polo” (lentil rice). He would first clean the cooked rice, the same way one would clean pulses, by separating a large amount of gravel from the rice. He would then stew the rice again with a little oil over the stove, add anything extra needed, then serve for all to eat together.

There were two or three toilets in the wing, which we

would clean in turn, and once a week we were taken to have a bath. They would typically give us 10–15 minutes so we would bathe in a hurry, but often when the time was up they would cut the water and if we had not yet rinsed ourselves, we were forced to wipe ourselves with a cloth or our dirty clothes, and then get dressed and wait until the following week. It is worth noting that this treatment was meted out to individuals to whom General Hedayat in his speech had said: “You were the best and the most honorable officers and we could not satisfy you”.

In the day we would exercise for an hour or two and would walk in the prison yard, because at all other times we had to sit in the cells. In the prison, folks would constantly be studying and often would study languages, especially because several of the officers had studied overseas for one or two years and were linguists. They would have regular classes for others. We had also requested some medical books and would review them. So we would all spend around 7–8 hours a day reading and studying.

I believe that the 500 or so officers who were members of the Tudeh Party, were amongst the purest of officers. None would cheat or steal, nor misuse their position, and we would pay a monthly membership fee to the



*With Giti and Kaveh soon after release from prison*

Party. I have not read any negative comments about these officers anywhere – wherever they are named whether orally or in books, the view is that they were

good and well meaning officers but were deceived by the Tudeh Party.

And about the Tudeh Party: firstly, it was founded in Iran with the help of the Soviet Union on a communist platform. Of course until the collapse of the Soviet Union around 1980, no one was aware of what went on inside the country, and were generally sympathetic to it. This was the case in the whole world, in that communist countries were generally maintained by the power of the Soviet Union. The Tudeh leaders, nearly all of whom were among the “53”, were supporters of the Soviet Union and its policies, but perhaps some of them took orders from the Soviets without much thought, which was not the right thing to do. On the other hand, there were others who, although followers of the Soviets, would not take orders from them – they later separated from the main Party. But ordinary members had faith in the Party, and the majority had sacrificed everything to join the Tudeh Party, and with no interest in money or status. It is widely believed that the only Party that deserves the name “Tudeh” (People) is indeed the Tudeh Party, and that it has contributed significantly to the culture of this country. For instance up until the first years of the reign of Reza Shah, from the age of 6–7 to 10–15 the population were educated in religious schools

only, and apart from a few, they could at most read simple books and manage their personal finances. In around 1927–8, junior and high schools began to increase in numbers. For example, in Mashad in 1932 where I was at school, there were only three high schools, slowly increasing in numbers in later years. It was in 1928–9 that school graduates would go for further studies to France for the first time. In those days, apart from books of ancient poetry, there were no other books to study, and in fact few people were interested in reading books anyway. From 1941, the world news was reported in one or two newspapers in Iran. And new popular books started to be published regularly, most of which were written by Tudeh members, and which had relatively high print runs. I remember that during the years 1941–51, in our youth, we read a lot of books and many newspapers were published which we would all read. These publications were mainly due to the influence of the Tudeh Party, as its members and leaders were highly educated – this contribution had an important positive effect on our culture, and for this we are indebted to the Tudeh Party.