

Foundation for Iranian Studies

Program of Oral History

MICHAEL METRINKO

INTERVIEWEE: MICHAEL METRINKO

INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM BURR

WASHINGTON, D.C.:

MAY 23, JUNE 14, AUGUST 29 AND OCTOBER 27, 1998 AND
MARCH 2, 1989

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PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a series of tape recorded interviews conducted for the Oral History of Iran Program of Foundation for Iranian Studies by William Burr with Michael Metrisko in Washington, D.C. in May 23, June 14, August 29, October 27, 1988, and March 2, 1989.

Readers of this Oral History memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Foundation for Iranian Studies is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein.

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PREFACE

The following oral history memoir is the result of five tape-recorded interview sessions with Michael Metrinko on May 23, June 14, August 29, October 27, 1988 and March 2, 1989. The interviews were conducted by William Burr in Washington, D.C.

This interview is one of a series on Iranian-American relations in the post-World War II era which were conducted as part of a joint project between the Oral History of Iran Archives of the Foundation for Iranian Studies and the Columbia University Oral History Research Office. Similar projects have been undertaken in England and France.

Mr. Metrinko has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind, however, that he or she is reading a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Form H

Dear Dr. Grele:

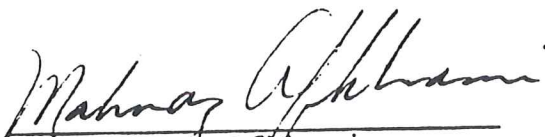
This letter will confirm my understanding and agreement with the Foundation for Iranian Studies Oral History of Iran Archives and Columbia University with respect to my participation in a series of interviews conducted by the Columbia University Oral History Research Office.

1. The interviews will be taped and a transcript made of the tapes. The transcribed interviews will be maintained by the Oral History of Iran Archives and the Columbia Oral History Research Office, and the Hoover Institution.

2. I hereby grant, assign and transfer to the Oral History of Iran Archives all right, title and interest in the interviews, including the literary rights and the copyright, except that I shall retain the right to copy, use and publish the Work in part or in full until the earlier of my death or THE YEAR 2005.

3. The interviews will be made available for use by researchers at both institutions in accordance with Foundation and University rules and general policies for research and other scholarly purposes with (no) (the following) restrictions.

I DO NOT WISH FOR ANY OF THE MATERIAL TO BE QUOTED UNTIL THE YEAR 2005.



Dr. Mahnaz Afkhami
Foundation for Iranian Studies

Very truly yours,



Ronald Grele,
Oral History Research Office



Date 22 Oct 1990

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Michael Metrisko is a career foreign service officer. His experiences with Iran began as a peace corps volunteer in Kurdistan. Later he worked and taught in Tehran. In later years he returned to Tehran as a member of the American Diplomatic mission. During the months leading to the Revolution of 1978-79, Mr. Metrisko served as the U.S. Consul-General in Tabriz. Following the Revolution he was taken hostage at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

His recollection shed much light on U.S.-Iranian relations, the working of Iranian politics before and after the Revolution, and the cultural ambience of Iran in the 1970s.

VA

Interviewee: Michael Metrinko

Session #1

Interviewer: William Burr

Washington, D. C.

May 23, 1988

Q: The following interview with Michael Metrinko by William Burr took place in Washington, D.C. on May 23, 1988. The interview is part of the joint project by the Columbia University Oral History Research Office and the Foundation for Iranian Studies. Mr. Metrinko, I have some questions about your background. Can you tell me where you were born and raised?

Metrinko: I was born in the city of Scranton, Pennsylvania November 11, 1946 and grew up in the family home in Olyphant, Pennsylvania, a small town about seven, eight miles from Scranton. The town of Olyphant was an immigrant town, in the coal-mining area of Pennsylvania, the anthracite belt. Almost everybody in the town was connected somehow with the coal mines and they were basically immigrants from the old Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia. Lots of Irish, lots of Italians as well. But at the time I was growing up it was a town where English was just one of the languages in the town. People were as likely to be speaking Polish or Czech or Ukrainian or Russian or Yiddish in the streets as they were English.

Q: And so you received your high school education in that town?

Metrinko: No, I went through grade school and junior high school in the Olyphant public schools. For my four years of high school I went to a Jesuit high school in Scranton, Scranton Preparatory School. I was graduated from Scranton Prep in 1964. Came to Georgetown University, the School of Foreign Service. I left Georgetown in 1968.

Q: And from there where did you go?

Metrinko: I left Georgetown, I was graduated in June of '68 and about one week later went into Peace Corps training with an assignment to Turkey. I left for Turkey in the later summer of 1968, after a one and a half month language course in California. In Turkey I spent two years teaching English at Hacettepe University.

From Turkey-- because my Peace Corps group was thrown out of Turkey, the Peace Corps itself left Turkey in 1970 for political reasons. I had planned to spend a third year in Turkey. Since my plans went up in the air with the departure of the Peace Corps, I asked for an assignment to Iran. I went to Iran expecting to spend one year there, but ended up spending three years instead. So I was a volunteer in the Peace Corps for five years.

Q: I have a question about your education. When you were at the Georgetown Foreign Service School, did you expect to go to the

Peace Corps pretty early on?

Metrinko: I did. This was a legacy of the Kennedy years. It was at that point a very significant organization and just appealed to my sense of ideals, and also I wanted to travel. The fact that the Vietnam War was going on was also a factor, of course, but it was really independent of that. If there had not been a war, I still would have gone into the Peace Corps. It was an excellent way to see a part of the world that I could not have gotten to otherwise.

Q: Now you said your Peace Corps group was thrown out of Turkey for political reasons?

Metrinko: Yes. One of the fallout factors from the Vietnam War was growing anti-Americanism in Europe, in the Middle East, and also 1968-69, just like in the United States were years of turmoil in the universities and the school systems of Turkey. The Peace Corps was looked on as a symbol of American imperialism, the spread of American influence into other countries. It conflicted-- the idea of the Peace Corps conflicted very greatly with the growing sense of radical nationalism the Turks were having at that point.

I'm not sure of the bureaucratic reasons for it, I was just a volunteer at the time, but the Peace Corps was a very visible symbol of the American presence on university campuses in towns

all over the country, and it was a symbol that both the Turkish government and the American government were prepared to sacrifice in order to restore some sort of normalcy, some sense of quiet to the relationship.

Q: That's very interesting. Now before you left for Iran, did you receive Persian language training?

Metrinko: No. I left Turkey, had a few weeks back in the United States on vacation and went immediately to Iran and started my Persian training there. And I studied Persian for approximately two months, four hours a day or so. The way I really learned Persian was to be assigned to a town where there were no Americans. I was the only native English speaker for several hours in any direction and it was a matter of survival. If I wanted to survive, I had to speak Persian or Turkish.

The town that I was assigned to for my initial year in the Peace Corps in Iran was a Turkish town in the middle of a Kurdish area. And so everybody in the town was tri-lingual-- Kurdish, Persian, Turkish. My Turkish was good, but it was the Turkish of Turkey, which was very different from the Turkish used in town. I used that though quite a bit for vocabulary, and I simply picked up Persian because I had to. I had to be able to control my classes to teach. I wanted to have a social life, and in order to get the necessities of life, everything from bus tickets to bread, you simply had to speak Persian, or one of the other

languages of the town. So I learned it that way.

Q: I think you told me before you were assigned to Songhor in Kermanshah Province?

Metrinko: Songhor. Or Songhor-o-kolayi. It was my first assignment. I spent a full year there. And at the end of the first year I was asked to participate in an English language seminar being given up on the Caspian by one of the small universities from a town near Tehran. At the end of the seminar, which was a very excellent seminar-- it was an intensive language program for very selected university students-- at the end of the seminar I was asked if I'd be interested in coming to the college for my second year in the Peace Corps. I accepted that and went to the Literacy Corps Teachers Training College in the town of Mamezan, which was about thirty miles from Tehran, on the old road going to Mashed. It was out going toward the desert.

Q: I have some questions about your first year, when you were in Songhor. Were you teaching there also?

Metrinko: I was a teacher in the high school and I was responsible for all the English classes in two different high schools, for the boys in the first year of high school. I had about two hundred students all told. Each class was three hours a week and I had four different classes. It was a light teaching

schedule per se, but I was also teaching at night. Teaching teachers and others who wanted special night courses, and especially helping out in special courses the senior students who were interested in taking the university entrance exams and who had to be-- their English had to be very, very good to pass the exams. I also did a lot of tutoring of individual Iranians who were interested. For free, of course. It was part of my service, which was tutoring in English for individual Iranians who were not involved in the school system, but were interested in taking the university exams.

Q: Had the Peace Corps been active in this area before you arrived?

Metrinko: There'd been one volunteer there before me and I don't believe he had finished off his tour.

Q: Was he also teaching?

Metrinko: Yes, he was also teaching.

Q: What were the socio-economic conditions like in this town?

Metrinko: Well, let's see. The town at that point had a population of perhaps eight thousand people in the town itself. Electricity had been brought to the town that year. It worked

part of the day. Electricity was basic. We're talking about a town where most of the houses were built of mud brick, where there was no plumbing at all. Perhaps in a few of the government buildings, but basically outdoor toilets, outdoor pumps for water, which meant that for a significant part of the winter everything was frozen. It was a rough winter there. Electricity at that point used to go off at midnight and would stay off until the next morning.

It was a very, very rural town. The nearest city of any consequence was Kermanshah. Because the road to Kermanshah was basically a dirt track over the mountains, it could take up to three, three and a half hours to get to Kermanshah. In the winter the road was often closed. It would be closed for a week at a time, for example. I've gotten stuck on the wrong side of the closing too. Rural, very rural.

There were no cinemas in the town. Television, of course, was not feasible in that part of the country. People had radios and very slowly small tape recorders were coming into vogue. At that time, in 1970, when I was in Songhor, there were almost no cars or motor vehicles in the whole town. There were buses, primitive buses, that would service Kermanshah, but on the bus you were as likely to be sitting with the sheep and poultry as you were with other passengers. They were general carry-all buses for carrying the villagers and the townspeople to the markets in Kermanshah. So you could be sitting there next to sacks of wheat or sacks of flour, a couple of chickens, baskets

of fruit.

Social life in the town was very restricted. It was a very conservative place. There was no alcohol in the town at all, except for one man who occasionally sold beer from the back of his house, and which I never touched, because every one in the street knew who was buying it. No television, as I said. Limited radio reception. No cinema. Someone had tried to build a cinema in the town and he had been warned that if he continued, he would be killed. He died when he continued, although it was always unclear how he had died.

Q: This was for religious reasons?

Metrinko: For religious reasons, yes. There was quite a religious stir in the town when he announced the plans to build a cinema and he was blasted from every pulpit for even attempting to do it.

Social life was very restricted, segregated by sex, so that all of my social activities there were male oriented. There were sports or dinners, and my friends and I basically went from house to house every night to different dinners. We would sit around playing cards, playing chess. Lots of sports activities. Visits to the villages over the weekend. The villages that were, say, an hour or two or three hours in the direction of the mountains, away from Songhor. And for real entertainment I would hitchhike down and visit other Peace Corps volunteers who were in the area,

but that could be a three hour trip, or four hour trip sometimes.

Q: Was this an agrarian area? Was the economy based on agriculture to a total extent?

Metrinko: Totally. Agriculture and sheep.

Q: Had the land reform program there had any impact in that area?

Metrinko: Yes. It had come in and it had wiped out the upper middle class of village Khans, the landlords. It had not particularly helped the villagers, as far as I could see. The villages themselves were extraordinarily primitive. I had no plumbing and only electric lines hanging from the ceiling with one light bulb. But if you went out to the villages, it was like going back into medieval times.

Q: How much influence did the central government have in that part of the country? Or how visible was the central government?

Metrinko: The central government influence was always strong. There was a very large police station in the town. You would see gendarmerie, of course, all the time as well, and that sufficed. It was a town that was anti-central government. It always had been. In fact, there was a joke in other cities in the area--

especially in Kermanshah-- they used to refer to Songhor as Leningrad. It was a town that had been very anti-Shah during the Mossadegh period, and a fair number of people in the town had political troubles. There were quite a number of executions in the town when the Shah came back to power.

Q: In '53?

Metrinko: '53, yes. It had never been a particularly pro-Pahlavi town. In fact, just the opposite. The town was not even given permission to have a statue of the Shah, but control was as rigid as the central government could make it there.

Q: Did SAVAK have much presence around there?

Metrinko: SAVAK had a presence. It was a word that was always used. And very quickly, as I got to know people, they would tell me about this person or that person who were supposed to be SAVAK employees and to be careful of them. A combination of the very strict religious sort of hierarchy in the town, of the religious strictures in the town, and the government presence made life rather straitened.

Q: What accounted for the opposition to the Shah? Was this for religious reasons?

Metrinko: A combination of things. The fact that the Shah and the Pahlavi family were not-- well, the people in the town were Turkic or Kurds, and the central government, the Pahlavi government, really never offered those minorities anything. There wasn't a feeling of kinship with the Pahlavi family at all, and the town itself prided itself on a strange sort of independence. There was talk for the whole year I was there of collecting money to asphalt the road from Kermanshah, and I remember talking to one of the other teachers there-- a very intelligent older person, rather religious, the only other person in the town who spoke very good English-- and when I asked when the road was going to be asphalted, he said, "You have to understand, we don't really want the road to be asphalted." He said, "Every couple of years they take up collections and they announce that it's going to be done, but most of the people here don't want the connection to be made that easy to the cities. We prefer to be the way we are." He said there's a lot of bias against asphaltting the road. People are afraid that it will bring in others from other cities here and that it will have a corrupting influence on the town.

Q: That's very interesting. What kind of attitudes did townspeople have towards the U.S.? Did you pick up any particular line of thinking?

Metrinko: Basically they didn't know where the U.S. was. I

remember once, as an example, being invited to a dinner, and I knew there had to be a reason for the invitation to me.

In the course of the dinner, the wife also came out and sat there having dinner with us. In this town it was very unusual, because basically women were kept totally segregated. Especially in front of other Iranian men, but across the board, unless it was a family event, the women were just not in evidence at all. Not even for serving the meal. That was always served by younger brothers, young boys or sons, or an occasional woman's hand coming out from behind the wall with a small tray attached to it, serving tea.

But sitting down at the dinner, I sat there wondering what was going to come up, because I knew there had to be a reason. And eventually the hostess got to the point, and she told me that her brother was now studying in my country and she had wanted me to come to dinner, to meet with me, because she thought it would be very nice if my family could perhaps invite her brother to their house for dinner; my parents, for example, or just to watch over him a little bit while he was off in my country. And I thought this was a great idea too and I asked for the address, where her brother could be reached. Well, he was in Germany. In the late sixties, in the early seventies, the United States for people in this town was still terra incognita. It just meant somewhere on the other side of the mountains. There were very few people from the town who had ever been there. In fact, in my whole time I think I met one doctor, who was assigned

to the town to the clinic, who had spent a year or two in the United States. That changed by the mid-seventies. By the mid-seventies there were lots of people who were going out to the United States to study, and a fair number of people from that town also came to the United States. In fact, now only in the Washington area I know seven or eight people from that town. But this would not have been true in 1970. For the people of the town it was a real trip, a journey that you thought about for a long time, if you were going up to Mashed to do a pilgrimage, or to Qom. Even going to Kermanshah, a couple of hours away, was something that you prepared for. You didn't just lightly jump into your car, because you had no car. It meant a full day and the awful possibility of having to stay overnight in a hotel. It was just not done very easily. And people would talk about their trip to go shopping. You know, foreign travel would have been considered very strange.

Q: Were there any other Americans in the area at all besides you?

Metrinko: The closest American to me was in the village of Sahneh, which was-- oh, if you were driving straight, about two and a half hours. If you were hitchhiking, anywhere from three to four.

Q: That was the other Peace Corps person?

Metrinko: Yes, that was a Peace Corps couple. They saved my sanity at times. After two or three weeks of only speaking Persian and broken English-- you know, this is a book, this is a table, that variety of English to two hundred Iranian students, one had to speak English once in a while.

Q: Now you said you next went to the Literacy Corps Teachers Training College at Mamezan.

Metrinko: Yes.

Q: How did this assignment come about?

Metrinko: Well, I was asked, because the academic year in Songhor ended in roughly May. I had a small vacation, a couple of weeks. And then I was doing a summer assignment. The seminar on the Caspian was due to run six weeks and I expected to finish that, have another vacation for a week or two, and come back to Songhor for my second year.

It was partially psychological, but partially also because I enjoyed it so much, teaching the university students. And these students were literally the cream of the university crop. To get into the Literacy Corps Teachers Training College you had to have been a Literacy Corps member for at least two years, which meant that all of the students had done their national service teaching in villages. That was one way to get in, but normally they had

three or four years of teaching experience in addition to that. So I became a teacher at the seminar, which had roughly a hundred students, but a teacher to students who all had very good work backgrounds. They were all very committed and basically very sharp. The difference between teaching fourteen-year-olds to speak English, when they could not yet speak Persian, and teaching university age students, who had four or five years of work experience, was the earth and the sun. It refreshed me so much and it was so stimulating that I welcomed the opportunity to take the assignment at the college. It was just a totally different life and a very stimulating intellectual life too.

Q: So you were there all the way through '73?

Metrinko: Yes.

Q: Were there other Americans at this college?

Metrinko: Well, at the seminars-- we had seminars for two years in a row, and at both seminars there were a number of Peace Corps volunteers. Ten, eleven-- I think at one point we had sixteen. But at the college itself there was only one other American. And for my second year there, I was the only American.

Q: The first year there was another Peace Corps volunteer also?

Metrinko: Yes.

Q: Who directed the college?

Metrinko: The college was set up and directed by a rather well-known Iranian academic, Amir Birjandi. Birjandi was socially very well connected to the top level of the Iranian government. He had an access to the court. He had been instrumental in establishing the Literacy Corps itself, the very idea of it. And he basically, because of the combination of oil money and his own contacts, had carte blanche with the school. If you needed something, he would write the check out and get it. The students were treated very well. They were coddled actually. And if the library needed books or you needed typewriters or this or that or anything, he was there ready to get it. He was very active, very involved, and a large number of students from this college were sent off to the United States to continue with higher education; master's degrees, doctoral degrees.

Q: How many students were there?

Metrinko: I'm not really sure. Several hundred. But several hundred at a minimum. The campus was beautiful. It was literally a park. Lovely buildings and was situated adjacent to a very old village. The village and the campus had a symbiotic relationship that was excellent for both. A great many of the

villagers, their sons and daughters, were affected by the presence of the college and went on to educational levels they never would attained otherwise. But it was all the university students who lived in the village, rented rooms in the village, and the fact that the villagers got jobs on the campus that really had an excellent effect on the village people.

As an example of that, just recently, about a month ago, the son of one of the drivers from the college-- the driver himself was a village man who became a bus driver and a maintenance man at the college, but his son was just graduated from a university in Tehran as the top student in the university, and he has a fellowship to the United States now. Without that connection to the college, the access they had to libraries, the access to the facilities of the school, the sort of intercourse or the inter-relationship with the students, I think this boy would probably just be another farmer in the village. And he's one of many I can think of.

Q: About how many faculty were there?

Metrinko: About fifty, sixty maybe.

Q: And you taught English all the way through?

Metrinko: I taught English.

Q: That was the main thing you taught?

Metrinko: Yes. English, but also I was there as an adviser about American schools, American life. I did a lot of one on one guidance counseling, a lot of one on one help with translations. The school was very big on translating works from English into Persian. Iranians in general at that period were; works in sociology, medicine, you know, agriculture, et cetera. And I taught students in a variety of different classes, but the students were either going on to become guidance counselors or high school principals, high school superintendents. Most of them were not going to go back to normal teaching. They were being trained as administrators, and a lot of them really required English. I also taught, in the second year, a couple of classes of students who were part of a new agricultural program and who were going to be going off then to work in the Ministry of Agriculture. Not to go into farming, but to go into administration of state enterprises and the Ministry of Agriculture itself.

Q: How well did you get to know the teachers at this institution?

Metrinko: Very well. I'm still in touch with them. With their families here. With them themselves. And the same is true for the students. I keep very good contacts going on. I'm on very

good relations with a fairly large number of them, to the extent where we visit back and forth. I've had visits as recently as a couple of months ago. Phone calls frequently. Many of the students, of course, and the teachers are scattered. Some are in the United States. The school faculty was purged in the early eighties. Many of my old friends lost their positions and went to work in either other offices away from campus or went to work as private business people.

Q: What did you learn about the political attitudes of the faculty and students at this point?

Metrinko: A great deal about the role that the security apparatus had in trying to pressure people to keep them quiet. I lived on the campus. I shared an apartment with a couple of other Peace Corps volunteers in the city of Tehran, but I also was given a room at the campus itself in one of the dormitories. Because of that I spent countless nights in both places with students, with faculty. It wasn't just going into school, teaching for two hours or three hours and leaving. My life was basically the life of an Iranian teacher. Because I was a bachelor I also had very good access with the students, in social life. I was very free to do anything I wanted to do.

I also, for my last year, had a roommate who was from the school, who had graduated from the school, was working as a guidance counselor in a small town about three hours away from

Tehran, but was coming up to Tehran itself to continue studies at the University of Tehran. And so he was one of my roommates for about three or four nights a week, when he had to do his school work, when he had classes at the university. Number one, I developed very good relationships, friendly relationships, with a large number of Kurdish students, from the towns of Mahabad and Nagadeh, the towns that are considered to be the center of Kurdish activity in Iran. I went to those towns as my students' guest and got to see people, places, things in those towns that I'm sure other foreigners had no access to, and things which even the normal Iranian would have no access to. See, Americans are different. We don't come loaded down with the social hierarchy hang-ups that any Iranian would have. We're free agents and we can go sit on a peasant's floor or we can be invited to the local landlord's house too, it doesn't make any difference. That's not true with an Iranian going to another Iranian town. But I heard a great deal, or learned a great deal, about Kurdish efforts, self-expression, semi-independence, autonomy, what have you. Their dislike of the central government. Saw and talked to a fairly large number of students who had had police trouble, people who had been in prison, students who had been in prison for anti-regime activities, or activities which the regime considered anti-regime. Reading the wrong books, making an off comment. I knew students very, very well who were taken off to prison, including one who died in prison at this period. I would hear a great deal about what was done to them at that point, and