

VA

Interviewee: Michael Metrinko

Session #2

Interviewer: William Burr

Washington, D. C.

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Q: The second part of the interview with Michael Metrinko took place in Washington, D. C. on June 14th, 1988.

Mr. Metrinko, when you broke off last time you were talking about your assignment in Turkey. I think you said during the interview that you were next sent to Syria. What was your assignment to Damascus?

Metrinko: I was sent to Syria for six months on a TDY, a temporary assignment, and basically I was vice-consul in the Consular Section. I was sent there to relieve people who were taking home leave, to fill in in the office during a period of absences of other personnel. The assignment was linked-- it was a temporary assignment linked with an onward assignment to the Consular Section in Tehran. I'm a consular officer and my basic work in Damascus involved visas, visits to American prisoners, things like that. Basically consular work.

I was assigned to Tehran and got there in March of 1977. My job there was in the visa section of the consulate. It was a building about two blocks from the main embassy on Iranshahr Avenue. And once I got to Tehran, my work in Tehran was in

specifically visa issuance, visa adjudication. I was in the job for-- well, I arrived in March of 1977 and actually because of a fluke, I was asked if I would go to Tabriz to be principal officer. I was asked in about July of 1977. The Tabriz Consulate had been at the point of being closed down, and because it was going to be closed, the officer who had been assigned to Tabriz was reassigned. He left on his new assignment, and at that point the State Department decided not to close the consulate after all, to keep it open for possibly one more year. Since there was nobody in the pipeline to be assigned to Tabriz from the Department itself, I was asked to go out and take the job for approximately one year.

The job in Tabriz was a totally different sort of position.

Q: Before we get to that, can we back up a little bit. Were you assigned to Iran by choice or were you just assigned?

Metrinko: Absolutely by choice. It was actually a bit funny. When I was in Turkey I wanted very much to go back to Iran on assignment. I had communicated with my personnel advisor back here in the State Department about this and I was told that there was nothing available in Tehran, nothing would be, that there were long lists of people waiting to get there, and that it would not be possible in the foreseeable future for me to go to Iran.

Fine. Almost exactly at that point when I was looking for a new job, when I was still in Turkey and looking for a follow-up

assignment, a telegram came out, world-wide distribution, asking for volunteers to go to Beirut. Beirut was then in the process of its civil war. This would have been in late '75 or early '76.

They asked for volunteers and what caught my attention was the last line in the telegram that said, anyone who goes to Beirut and serves a tour there would be given first choice, their first choice, for a new assignment afterwards. I wanted to go very much to Iran and I decided that if I went to Beirut and spent a year or two years there, I would then be able to get my choice of going to Tehran.

Everything was in process for me to go to Beirut. My air freight was being sent there. My household effects were packed up and being sent off to storage. The State Department was communicating regularly with me about arrangements for arrival in Beirut. I was given several weeks of home leave back in the United States prior to my departure for Beirut. I arrived back in the States and was going to spend one day in the Department here. Met somebody by chance in the lobby of the building, who looked at me and said, "I'm sorry, your assignment to Qatar was broken." And I said, "I'm not going to Qatar. I'm going to Beirut." He said, "No, that was broken about two months ago." The consular section in Beirut had been closed.

I never had heard this and basically didn't know a thing about it. There was a mix-up in the personnel system, where one office was continuing to send me directions, information, and telegrams about arriving in Beirut. The other office had broken

the assignment, because nobody was being sent to Beirut to the consular section. But the other office had never told me and had never told their own colleagues. So I found out totally by chance that I wasn't going to Beirut.

The personnel people then worked out a deal and sat me down and talked to me about a challenging assignment. They were having lots of trouble getting people to go to a particular country and would I be at all interested. They knew I spoke Persian, and would I think of accepting an assignment to Tehran, where nobody wanted to go to. This is in contrast to what they'd said about six months before, when they said everybody was lined up and there was no chance of ever getting there.

Q: Did they explain why people were reluctant to go at that stage?

Metrinko: No. It was just basically people not talking to each other back here in the Department. It's a huge cumbersome bureaucracy, and at that point the new methods for bidding on jobs, et cetera, were being worked out. There were still lots of rough edges. But they asked if I'd be willing to go to Tehran. I just stood there sort of aghast, thinking I volunteered to go to Beirut in order to get to Tehran and now they're asking me to go to Tehran, never having known that I had really wanted to go there in the first place apparently. But they basically sweetened it with the assignment to Damascus first.



Q: Now in the consular section, in the U.S. Consulate in Tehran, you worked with Iranians who were trying to get visas to come to the United States or worked on American citizens' problems?

Metrinko: I was in the non-immigrant visa section. We handled visas for students who wanted to come to the United States, businessmen, tourists, basically non-immigrant visas. For a time I was just one of the officers in the section, and approximately three months into my job there-- this would have been around May or so-- I was asked to take over the non-immigrant visa section.

Q: Now, as I recall, I think in his book James Bill talks about the role of the so-called Armenian Mafia in the Consulate Section.

Metrinko: Highly exaggerated. Because of the various local employees in the consular section, it's true there were several Armenians, but there were also lots of Moslems, and the Moslems represented a variety of different parts of the country too. I can think of-- you know, right now when I go down the list in my mind of who was working there, there were quite a few Armenians who worked in the embassy in general, but Bill's points, I think, are highly exaggerated.

Q: I think his argument is that the non-Farsi, non-Persian employees treated Iranians in a rude and officious way, that that

gave them a bad impression of the United States.

Metrinko: That's simply silly. Just absolutely silly. It would not have been possible. What happened-- or what you have to understand about Iranians in general is that almost any Iranian bureaucrat ex officio becomes rude. It doesn't make a bit of difference if a person is an Armenian, a Syrian-- you know, Zoroastrian or Jewish or Persian or Sunni, Shi'ite, whatever. Ex officio, they become rude. It goes with the titles and it was true in Persian bureaucracies and our bureaucracy.

The other factor that Jim Bill forgets is that on a normal day in the consular section we were dealing with sometimes a thousand people in the building. When you have a hot summer day, say the temperature is a hundred and five, no air-conditioning, most of that summer no electricity, because Tehran was going through its sort of periodic bout of being out of electricity-- we had brownouts almost every day or blackouts-- if you put six hundred, seven hundred people waiting to get visas into a building that is not air-conditioned, when it's a hundred and five degrees out and there's no electricity, and you have people who have been waiting all night long to get into the visa section, because the lines were so tremendous that you had to be there the night before in order to get a place that morning, you're going to have a situation where it's basically impossible or very difficult to be docile, friendly, or whatever.

We had crowds like that almost every day that I was there.

That was tied, of course-- I mean, you have to link that to the fact that we had limited personnel ourselves working there. We were always under budget constraints and positions were always short. If you had one person not show up because of illness, it meant that a hundred people would be affected. But I've seen-- you know, again I can say I've seen rudeness, but I've also seen a great deal of concern, helpfulness, et cetera. And you can't make the distinction between Armenian or Sunni or Shi'ite or whatever.

The other factor is that Iranians in a crowd tend to be very unruly. They stand very much on their own opinion of their position, and especially when they were trying to get visas, they could be very demanding, very rude to the people who were trying to control the waiting rooms or just trying to process things.

Q: Now what were your impressions of economic and social conditions in Tehran at this stage?

Metrinko: That's a broad question.

Q: Well, how much have they changed since you were last there, I guess I'll put it that way.

Metrinko: Put it this way. When I first got to Iran in 1970, the first time I was actually living there, the flood of money from oil revenues had not yet hit Iran. Oil prices were still

down, production was still down. In the town I lived in, for example-- let me compare it that way, because I followed this particular town in my first Peace Corps assignment very, very carefully. In my Peace Corps site in Iran, a town of at most eight to ten thousand people, in the year 1970 there were at most four or five private cars in the whole town. Very few people from the town had ever traveled. Oh, they would go to Mecca on the pilgrimage, they would go to Meshed or to Qom. Perhaps they had been to Najaf or Kerbalah in Iraq for an earlier religious pilgrimage. But basically there was no international travel of any note. For the average person of that town to make a trip to the nearest city for shopping, it was a major production.

You could walk out on the streets, and I have pictures of the streets of the town that I would take, for example, at noontime, two, three in the afternoon, and you just see a huge empty street, with one jeep or one car parked several blocks down the way. And sheep in the streets and animals in the street, things like that.

By 1972-73 Iran was starting to import and to produce large numbers of cars. The oil revenue was starting. By 1977, when I returned, in that small town there were traffic jams, literally traffic jams. No parking, traffic accidents constantly, jams constantly. Crowded streets of people trying to both carry on the traditional methods of walking in the streets, driving flocks of sheep or other animals in the streets, and yet many, many cars.



By 1977-78 students had started going to the United States, to Germany, to England to study from that town. By that point, because the money was filtering down, people from the town had gotten into tourism. Once you had a son or a daughter-- but from that area basically sons-- living in the United States, you were likely to go and visit them. And so there was a scattering of people who had been to the United States in that four or five years.

There was another factor too, which greatly affected the small towns and villages. I had a close friend who was a teacher in one of the villages of Songhor, my Peace Corps site, and in 1970-71 I visited his village frequently. It was literally the end of the world. Songhor was three hours away on a dirt road from the city. This village was another hour and a half walk from Songhor over basically a goat track. You could get a motorcycle over it, but not much else. Houses that were made of mud. No running water of any sort. No electricity of any sort. And really no concept of any sort of the outside world. The people from this particular village never left. For them, to come to Songhor, was a major trip, something they did not do lightly.

By 1978-- I remember specifically one person, who worked as a servant in the one-room schoolhouse. He was a villager, he plowed his field, he worked as a maintenance man, and in 1970-71 he was constantly talking about trying to get enough money together to get married.

1978 I revisited the same little village. I went up to Songhor with the same friend who had been a teacher there. In the meantime my friend had gotten accepted to a university, had gotten his degree from the university. He started the university in 1973. He finished in 1977. And in '77 he got a very good job with an American company. His English was good. So he had made the leap from a teacher in a one-room school, teaching grade school to Kurdish villagers-- he had made the leap to getting a bachelor's degree and a really very decent job, because of his English, with a major western contracting company.

We went back together to this particular village and visited the home of his former servant, the villager who was totally illiterate, who had only rarely been to Songhor. That man wasn't home. He was working down in Abadan, doing construction work in the Persian Gulf. He now had a wife and a child. The house was totally different from other houses in the village. He had spent quite a bit of money fixing up a rather decent house. There were carpets in the house. There was a tape recorder in the house. There was a big sort of portable stereo in the house. Radios, things like that. The sort of things that you would buy if you were working down in the Gulf. Tourist items and other items. You know, little luxury items that in the year 1971 he had had no concept of. In the year 1971 he was desperate to get married, so that he'd have a wife. By 1978 he was working down in the Persian Gulf. He would be flown down there with lots of other workers. Go to Kermanshah, get a flight, a special flight

arranged by the construction companies, get flown to the Persian Gulf, spend most of the year down there working, come back to do a little bit of spring plowing, come back again for the harvest and for conjugal visits. But he was basically working in a major metropolis and shipping money back to the village.

So by that time, in those years '71 to '78, even the most remote villages had had tremendous transformations, social transformations, including experience with air flight, with-- you know, automobiles are nothing, but air flight! Exposure to lots of foreigners, exposure to high technology. And also because of the necessity of working in a major city, exposure to a whole new social system. The social system in the village was collapsing. The men were gone. It was a village of women basically at this point. I don't know who the first man from this little village was to go down and work on construction, but he had gradually brought all the others down with him. So you had a village of old men, old women, young brides, little children, and no men. And this was, as far as I could see, fairly typical. The oil boom, the need to find workers, was breaking down the social system, the family system, in the most primitive parts of Iran. If you want to extend that to Tehran, in 1970, when I-- well, I'd been there as a tourist in 1969, I'm not counting that. In 1970, when I first started to visit Tehran on holidays from my Peace Corps site, 1971-72, Tehran was still a fairly quiet city. It was clean, quiet, calm. There wasn't all that much traffic. I'm not sure of the population at that point. I would guess

perhaps two million or so, at most. But basically there was no traffic problem. By the time I was leaving Tehran in 1973, it was quicker to walk somewhere than to try and drive, because so many cars were flooding into the city. By 1977-1978, it would have been quicker to crawl than to try and drive, because the whole city was a major traffic jam. In 1971, if I wanted to go from my home in the central part of Tehran to the north part of Tehran, it meant finding a taxi and basically riding up empty streets. I could be in North Tehran in, say, twenty minutes maximum. By 1978-- I remember once, trying to go out for dinner, leaving my home with a friend from Tehran, who knew the city-- leaving my home at around six in the evening, not getting to North Tehran until three hours later.

Q: You're talking about Tabriz?

Metrinko: No. I'm talking Tehran.

Q: You were coming from Tabriz?

Metrinko: No. Basically Tehran had become one blocked traffic jam, with all of the increase in irritation, the psychological troubles, the sort of general nervousness that comes when traffic is a constant factor twenty-four hours, making everyone angry. The city had just changed totally. There were no more quiet streets, no more calm. It was basically traffic. And thousands



and thousands and thousands of workers pouring in from all over Iran every day, looking for jobs in construction. There was a tremendous boom going on all over Iran, but specifically in the major cities. And they simply imported as many workers as they could from the outlying villages, which, of course, had an effect on the agriculture. They were also importing large, large numbers of foreigners. Afghanis, other people, to come and do construction work. It was changing the face of the city, but it was having effects, rather severe effects, in the social makeup of the country.

This also meant, of course, that-- you know, you'd have to imagine the streets-- or picture the streets of Tehran in the late seventies. Walking down a street in the central part of the city-- I'm not talking about northern Tehran, where there were large villas and quiet tree-shaded lanes-- but in the central part of the city, the southern part of the city, you couldn't walk down a sidewalk in a straight line. You were sort of constantly in a crowd, jostling-- maneuvering your way down the sidewalk. The streets were like that too. The city streets were just packed with cars. And walking down any street in the central part, the southern part of the city-- it was obvious, there were just thousands of young men all over the place. Sort of meandering around, walking around, looking for something exciting. If you opened up a suitcase full of socks to sell on the street corner, you could attract a crowd of a hundred people.

The Iranian municipality, or the Tehran municipality, had

simply lost control of the city. It had exploded. Population, cars, noise. And, of course, once you have that, you have the breakdown of normal services. Water wasn't getting to houses. Electricity was being shut off for large periods of time, because they simply didn't have enough power to generate electricity for the new population of the city. Which, of course, only added to the constant frustration and anger of being there, when you knew that you would have no electricity at home, your refrigerator was going to go off, if you had a refrigerator. You knew your house was going to be hot. It goes on like that.

Q: You were only in Tehran for a few months at that stage, but did you form impressions of the political situation in the country or the capitol at that stage?

Metrinko: Of course I was sitting in an office, or sitting behind a window, a sort of bank teller's window in the Consular Section, every day dealing with one or two hundred visa applicants. We dealt with that per person, one or two hundred, and basically watched people running away from Iran, Iranians.

A consular officer has a view of the country he or she is serving in that is unparalleled. It doesn't exist-- such a position doesn't exist in a local government. It doesn't exist in any other office in an embassy. I could sit there and every day-- my own quota was perhaps a hundred, a hundred and fifty, whatever the number was, passports to be presented to me,

questionnaires, and we had to interview a large number of the people.

Iranians who would come in to talk to us individually were very often very frank. You can imagine. They've been sitting outside since yesterday evening, waiting in line to get in. These are normal housewives, officers, actors--

Q: They would come the day before to get in?

Metrinko: They would come the day before, stand in line, or sleep on the sidewalk that night, in order to get access to the waiting room of the Consular Section early the next morning. So we were talking to people who were frustrated, a little bit angry, annoyed, and basically very frank. Iranians love to talk. They'll talk about anything. They're not a reticent people at all. And faced with an American who spoke Persian or Turkish, and knowing their conversation was private, because they couldn't hear the conversations on either side of them, they could be very often brutally frank about conditions in their country. If you asked someone why he or she wanted to leave-- you know, "Why are you going to the United States?"-- most often the answer was, to see my son, to see my daughter. But there was also a steady stream of answers like, because this place is awful. I don't want to live here. I want to go and look at possibilities for investment.

We would see a large number of documents in each applicant's

case. Basically an applicant for a non-immigrant visa has to prove that he or she has ties to their own country. And in order to support this, they would bring in property deeds, bank statements, all sorts of letters-- proof of family ties, in order to convince us that they were indeed coming back. They had so much holding them to Iran that they would come back to Iran.

Well, they would also have to show that they had the money to go to the United States or the money to pursue their educations there. The impression I got from this was, number one, a tremendous capital flow to the United States from Iran.

Q: This is all flight capital?

Metrinko: Yes. A lot of people were selling off property, were basically moving their bank accounts to the United States. An awful lot of people would simply talk about this. Well, when you have one army or, you know, military colonel or high-ranking officer after another come in and explain that he wanted his son to go to school in the United States, to high school, because he didn't want him to have to do military service in Iran-- for example, the military was doing this. When you had all sorts of retired officers, bureaucrats, professors-- the people who were fifty and above-- explaining that they wanted to retire in the United States, when you had people that would sit there and say outright that they felt there was going to be trouble in Iran, that the bubble was going to burst and they didn't want to be



there for the bursting, they wanted to move, we would get that quite frequently. At least I would.

Q: So the businessmen were losing confidence in the regime's ability to sustain itself and they wanted to invest their money somewhere else?

Metrinko: Yes. It is not normal in the United States for an American businessman to take his capital and invest it all in a foreign country. They have confidence in the system here. It is not normal for someone to retire in the United States and move to a foreign country. To give up everything. To sell house, land, et cetera, and to move away to another country. It is not normal in most countries. When you see a whole class of people-- intelligent, moneyed, professional people, the sort of people who in their fifties and sixties should be the basis for the culture and the continuation of the society, a sort of bulwark of stability-- when you see them running away, you know there are going to be problems. That included up to the Shah's family.

Q: This is all in the spring?

Metrinko: This is all in 1977, sure.

Q: Did you report these findings to the political officers at the embassy?

Metrinko: The political officers in the embassy basically wouldn't talk to us. That's a standard problem with political officers and other sections of the embassy. We did write it down. I wrote reports. Other people were writing reports. They were just two different worlds.

It was actually funny, because the Political Section would only talk to us basically when they wanted to get visas for their contacts or their friends. Their contacts or their friends would come in and explain how and why they wanted to leave Iran. But they never seemed to be telling this to the political officers and the political officers weren't bothering asking. It was rather funny.

There's also something else. When a consular officer is sitting looking at passports and applications for people who want to leave, he can get the impression that the whole country is leaving. That's also not true. But the impression definitely was there and it was being backed up by economic data. You know, the reporting of what the Economic Section was doing. Capital flight. And should have been backed up by anybody who ever went to an Iranian party and listened to what people were talking about.

Q: Now during this same period a religious revival is going on. I guess during the mid-seventies and obviously the late seventies. How visible was that from your vantage point?

Metrinko: In North Tehran it wasn't visible at all. Even in-- well, '78 was different. In '77 I didn't see it. My friends were basically provincial, lower level socially. Not all of them, but most of them. And they certainly weren't experiencing this. Just wasn't there.

The other factor in my particular position was that my Peace Corps site was intensely religious, to the point of fanaticism, constantly. So when you ask about a religious revival, people in Tehran, no matter how much they revived, you know, religiously, could never have approached the level that I was already used to. So it didn't seem like a revival to me. I was used to women all of whom were in veils. You know, not talking to men, not touching men, not even speaking to them or being in the same rooms. I was used to a totally segregated society, male and female separate. I was used to men who basically wore black or dark clothing, who didn't shave a couple of days in a row. I was used to people whose social lives centered around going to Mecca or going to the other shrines. I was used to the fasting and other things. I was used to the Ashura ceremonies and the beating with chains. That to me was not-- when I saw indications of that in Tehran, it didn't strike me as a revival. It was there in the background all the time for me.

Q: Back to a question on the embassy. You had very little contact with embassy officials generally during this period, before you went to Tabriz?

Metrinko: The Consular Section and the embassy were physically separated. Our work was dirty, demanding, very time-consuming, very long hours in miserable conditions. It was not a place that people from the main chancery liked to come. They would only venture there if they had to escort somebody who was a good contact and for whom they wanted visas.

There was also a social and professional level factor. My friends in the embassy tended to be the same rank that I was. You know, vice-consuls, lower ranking, on their first or second tours. With a few exceptions. The higher-up officials in the embassy would basically have no contact with us. There was no way-- well, there were ways, but they simply didn't do it. In a smaller embassy, this would not have been true. In a quieter country, this would not have been true. But because Iran, and Tehran especially, was so socially active, with so many thousands upon thousands upon thousands of foreigners, with so many American military, such a huge American community, and with a Persian middle and upper middle class that were extremely social, there were really few opportunities when the "higher-ups" in the embassy wanted to meet with "lower-downs" in the embassy.

The embassy also had several hundred people. It's still not as bad as many other embassies in western Europe, where you could go through a whole tour and never see the ambassador physically, or never be invited to an embassy function as such.

Q: Now you talked about how you were assigned to Tabriz earlier.