

How would you describe your responsibilities at the consulate there?

Metrinko: In Tabriz?

Q: Yes.

Metrinko: I was principal officer. That means I was basically responsible for everything. I had consular responsibilities, American services, and visa responsibilities. So I was also my own consular section. I was in charge of the administration of the physical plant there. It was a large complex of buildings. We had approximately-- oh, something like I think twelve acres, thirteen acres of land. I was responsible for all the employees, the personnel, ultimately responsible for the fiscal nature of the consulate. And responsible also for political reporting, because Tabriz had a consular district that was quite large. It went all the way down to Ilam Province, all the way up to the Caspian Sea.

I was also responsible for the region. This meant that I was on the road quite a bit. I'd say about a week every month. Visiting other cities, paying courtesy calls, just sort of showing-the-flag type visits. Also doing consular work. Getting in touch with, getting to know the American community that existed all over that part of Iran. Getting to know the American military, who were assigned to several towns in that part of

Iran. Staying with them, having them come to stay with me in Tabriz.

It was a huge consular district. It was basically western Iran. And so that part was very time-consuming.

Q: Were there other Americans on your staff at Tabriz?

Metrinko: No. I was the only one, except for a secretary who worked with me for a few months.

Q: You had Iranian assistants?

Metrinko: I had Iranian assistants, yes.

Q: You mentioned earlier that there had been talk about closing down Tabriz. Why was that?

Metrinko: Well, you have to understand something about the bureaucratic process here. We constantly look at consulates, embassies, at their functions, whether or not the level of personnel is sufficient or too much or whatever. And up through the mid-seventies Tabriz was considered a very quiet place. The consular load there was not considered really large or worth maintaining a presence for. We had a very expensive, very beautiful piece of property, and so people who were interested in getting some money were constantly looking at it as something

that could be sold off. It was really a consulate that belonged in a different era. Rather huge and grand house, a rather huge and grand, basically empty office building. Lots of land. A great deal of land. And facilities that cost quite a bit to maintain.

There was also very, very much a perception in Tehran that the center of power, the center of interest, was Tehran and the palace, that basically what was happening out in the outlying provinces was not germane. That it was provincial politics, not important. It's the sort of inside the beltway mentality that you get in Washington. People forget that there are other parts of the United States. That would happen in Tehran too. So that very often people wouldn't even bother-- even political officers wouldn't bother visiting other parts of the country. They saw their job as basically one of knowing Tehran and knowing one part of Tehran and knowing one group of people, the ones they assumed had power and would make all the decisions about Iran's future. It's funny, the whole time I was in Tabriz I don't think anyone from the Political Section ever visited me. They saw no need to.

Q: All the way through early '79?

Metrinko: Right. Exactly.

Q: Did Armish-MAAG have some offices in that-- ?

Metrinko: Yes.

Q: Or were they the TAFT, the field teams?

Metrinko: We had the field teams there. At the Tabriz Air Base we had an Air Force contingent, a combination of Air Force personnel plus contract workers for the Air Force. I'm not sure of the number now. I think by 1978 there were about ten there. We had an army attache assigned to Tabriz. With his own house, his own staff. One American Army. Several Air Force. Around Tabriz and other cities we had a variety of other people. We had an American colonel assigned to Rezaiyeh with a field house out there. We had someone in Sanandaj. We had a rather large contingent down in Kermanshah, and others also. I knew the people in Kermanshah and Tabriz and Rezaiyeh very well. There was also somebody in Hamadan. I never got to that particular base, but there was someone there, I know.

Q: Were there any American businessmen active in the area? Investors or traders?

Metrinko: In Tabriz we had in 1977-78 I'd say roughly a hundred and fifty Americans. There was one construction company which had several personnel there. There was a large group, twenty or so, working out at the oil refinery. The oil refinery in Tabriz was a new one. It was being computerized and they were working

on that project. We had the military. We had a variety of teachers. Quite a few teachers at the university. At the Iran-America Society there were a fairly-- I don't want to say a large number, but a fair scattering or smattering of American wives married to Iranian husbands, whom they had met at universities in the United States.

But basically that sort of-- it was a rather-- not large, not huge American community. A hundred, a hundred twenty, a hundred fifty, whatever, at various times. But it combined with a moderate British community, because the British also had a military presence in Tabriz.

Q: What form was that?

Metrinko: They were working on the tank program at the army base. There was a rather large Italian presence, people who had built the refinery. There were quite a few Eastern Europeans. A large Soviet presence, well over a hundred people who were assigned to the Soviet trade mission in Tabriz and who worked also on the electrification of the railway project. There was an electric rail line that went from Tabriz up to Jolfa on the Soviet border. And they were based in Tabriz, people who were responsible for the maintenance, the administration, of that whole leg of the railway. It was an important project for them, because they basically controlled access of freight to the Soviet Union in that part of Iran.

Q: Did the CIA have any people?

Metrinko: Not that I know of. Certainly nobody was assigned to the consulate.

Q: Now I've seen in the volumes of captured documents that there was a draft, a set of the instructions that Jack Miklos sent to the various consuls in various parts of the country. Whether they were actually sent to you, I don't know, but the instructions discuss the kind of information that the embassy wanted to get from the various consuls.

Metrinko: Sure. That's standard, yes. You'll get that in any consulate from the main embassy, to coordinate reporting, to keep the consulate officers sort of informed of what the embassy's interested in, what priorities should be, specific projects they're interested in following up on.

Q: For example, Miklos wanted you to sketch out the basic structure of the province, to do research on the regional structure of political power, to learn about provincial municipal government, the role of the Rastakhiz Party. Did you do studies on things like that or those questions?

Metrinko: Yes. I would touch on that in reporting. Basically yes. Including biographic information on people who were

important, who might become important later in the central government. It was also a way of getting officers who were removed from the embassy to look at the politics, the political society, intelligently, in a coherent manner.

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BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE.

Q: So you did all contacts among local government officials?

Metrinko: Basically yes. Just by living there it was impossible not to. My social life in Tabriz was very Iranian. Very Iranian oriented. Extremely. Unlike that of, I think, most other officers in the country.

When I arrived in Tabriz, I already had a lot of Iranian friends. People from Peace Corps days, people I had met in Tehran on my assignment there, and people I kept meeting. I've always run a very open door policy to my house, wherever I've been. I like having visitors and I encouraged Iranian friends from other parts of the country to visit me. The consulate was spectacularly beautiful. You know, I keep going back to that, but it was really a wonderful place and it was very pleasant to be a host there. It was no bother for me at all. I had an excellent cook, a very good maid. I had a driver, gardeners, et cetera, all the people who could handle the laborious parts of being a host. I could call my cook at eleven o'clock in the

afternoon from the office, which was on the same compound, tell her I was bringing six people over for lunch, and an hour later, when we got there for lunch, she would have a beautiful lunch laid out for six people.

So this sort of thing-- it was no trouble at all, and a pleasure to be able to sit at the head of the table and sort of preside. Then get up from the table and have coffee and leave, and everything was polished and waxed and made clean again in time for dinner that night.

I was very, very rarely alone in the house. Just a constant stream of visitors. I'd say in the course of my year and a half in Tabriz, from August of '77 through February of '79, I had a couple of hundred house guests.

Something else that I did in an attempt to get to know the people of the city and the people of the neighborhood-- the Tabriz compound was again twelve, thirteen acres, whatever, surrounded by a high wall in the Persian style. It included huge gardens, formal gardens, this garden, that garden, rose gardens. We had twelve hundred trees on the compound. This is in an area that's semi-arid. I had a huge, huge swimming pool, almost Olympic sized. I had tennis courts, I had a volleyball court. I had a softball field. All of this beautifully maintained by the gardening staff. I had an almond orchard. You know, not I, but it was all there and useable. What I basically did was turn over a lot of the facilities to the neighborhood people. Up until that time there'd been a policy of restricting access to the



facilities of the consulate to house guests or to the British, the general sort of western foreign community. Well, I looked at the swimming pool, knew that there were no other pools in the city of Tabriz, or just one or two that were not really clean, not really suitable for families. So my first summer there, the first full summer, 1978, early on in the summer I had met a large number of people who were involved in sports in the city. Teachers, coaches, et cetera. I got in touch with a couple of them and told them that I wanted to start using the pool for children or families from the immediate area of the consulate. It was not a tremendously good neighborhood. It was sort of lower middle-class around the consulate. But I passed out the word through the coaches that anyone who wanted to could get a pass or an identification card which would allow them access to the pool. I don't swim. It seemed a crime to me to have this huge swimming pool, with all the changing rooms and showers and facilities, sitting in the middle of an almond orchard and never to use it, and I could see no reason whatsoever to turn it over to the British expat community. I wasn't there as an envoy to the Brits. So I passed the word around and within a couple of days, a week or so, had about a hundred people or so who signed up-- families from the neighborhood-- to use the pool on the days that it was going to be open. We had it open for the public I think three or four days a week in the summer. I did want privacy sometimes in the compound, especially over weekends, when my staff wouldn't be around to control access.

But it turned out to be, you know-- I thought it was really great. I got to meet a lot of people that way, number one. But also it exposed a large number of people from the neighborhood to the consulate facilities, to what was there behind the wall. And in the course of the summer, the head swimming coach-- oh, I arranged with the coaches. They came and did this for free, because they were interested too. And they set up a normal neighborhood program of teaching children from the neighborhood how to swim.

Q: This was the first time you were there or the second summer?

Metrinko: Well, I got there in August of '77, so it was already too late. The reason all this started was because I had an Iranian friend who visited me in the winter, somebody who was a professional football player, a soccer player from Tehran. And when he and his fiancée were visiting me, he was out walking outside the consulate walls and stopped to watch a group of guys-- teenagers from the neighborhood playing football outside on the street. They knew who he was. He was a pretty well-known football player. They asked him what he was doing in Tabriz and he told them he was visiting me, staying at the consulate. One of the guys said, "I've lived here my whole life. I've never seen what's on the other side of the walls."

He told me that and it started me thinking, and I decided this is crazy. I don't need all this for myself. So I basically

turned it over.

But anyway, in the course of that next summer, the coaches told me that they had taught swimming to something like fifty or sixty children. And they had wonderful classes. I'd go out and watch them once in a while. And classes to which the mothers could come. I'd walk out to the swimming pool on the far edge of the consulate compound and there'd be, oh, ten, fifteen, twenty women in veils sitting out there watching their children. It was considered a safe, clean place to come. Nobody was going to hassle them and they could do this with their families. It worked out very, very well.

I also turned over, literally, the football field to a couple of teams in the neighborhood. Just to the guys in the neighborhood who wanted to play football. I always thought it was a shame they were playing in the streets. So they had access too and they used it quite a bit.

Q: Just for practice?

Metrinko: Practice for their own games. The American community also was always welcome there and they would come over quite a bit-- either to the pool or to play tennis or whatever. It was almost-- especially from say spring of '78 until late autumn, it was more like being in a public park than a consulate. It worked out very well.

Q: It sounds pleasant.

Metrinko: Yes, they were the same guys who were going to attack the consulate, you know, the next winter. At least this way they had a way to get a picture of the interior layout.

Q: I guess so. Who were some of the local officials that you got to know, local government officials in Tabriz that you had contact with?

Metrinko: The Governor's office. Tabriz was the capitol of the East Azerbaijan. So we had a full Governor's office there. I knew the governors and lieutenant-governors fairly well professionally. The mayor's office certainly. I was new, the mayor was. And his chief assistants. That was normal.

Q: Do you recall any names of some of these people?

Metrinko: Sure. I'd rather not go into it though.

Q: Oh, okay.

Metrinko: But I got to know them quite well and their families too in most cases. The basic top government structure I knew very well. I knew some of the police, although police kept their distance. I had lots of police friends in Tehran. In fact, I

would stay with police friends in Tehran normally when I went there to visit the embassy. The ones I knew in Tehran were my old students from Peace Corps days, who had then gone to the police academy to become officers. So we were old friends. The SAVAK officials-- I always knew the head of SAVAK, but really had no social life or anything else with them. I mean, I would pay the courtesy call when a new one came in, or once in a great while go over. But it was really limited. I think I was in the SAVAK headquarters maybe three, four times in the course of the year and a half.

It was easy to get to know them, because they all required services from the consulate. All of the officials, of course, and families, friends, who were going to the United States. So it was basically a decent professional relationship. There were some good people there.

Several members of the local government-- the deputy governor, the mayor, a couple of others-- were also on the board of directors of the Iran-America Society. So I got to know them at meetings too that way.

Q: So the Iran-America Society had a branch in Tabriz?

Metrinko: Had a branch in Tabriz. It was a very active, very large branch. Several hundred students at any particular time. Some good teachers, good directors. The last director is now in the Foreign Service.

Q: They had English language training, plus they had cultural activities?

Metrinko: Yes. Basically English language training, but also-- less on the cultural side, but there was a scattering of that too. The occasional art show or something of that sort. Or films.

Q: Now the instructions that Miklos wrote also asked you to learn what you could about the political opposition and its activities in and around Tabriz. How much did you learn about the political opposition in the period before February '78, when the big demonstrations occurred in Tabriz?

Metrinko: There was always political opposition. In an organized fashion, very little. I had tried repeatedly, but very unsuccessfully, to get to know some of the clergy. I mean, the Moslem clergy. I knew the Armenian clergy. I had no luck whatsoever. I think probably that my request for meetings were not being passed on to the clergy. I would say that. Certainly there was a very, very strong-- a very, very strong bias with my local staff against my meeting anyone in the clergy. I assumed then, and I think I'm right, that they were afraid of SAVAK reaction to that hitting them, as the people who had arranged contacts or meetings. So basically with the clergy, nothing. In the course of 1978 I met a couple of members of the clergy, one

of whom was later defrocked, and another one of whom became very high up in the Tabriz revolution, and then also fell out of favor as the years went by. And I think he's basically left Tabriz now and is off doing something quietly in Tehran, trying to have people forget his name.

Q: Were any of the people who were involved in the old nationalist opposition around?

Metrinko: Yes. Sure. But that wasn't all that active. You know, they would sit around and talk, but they weren't organizing or doing anything. The events in Tabriz in 1978 in February I think caught them by surprise. Probably more by surprise than it did us. There was no concept of that.

Opposition in a formal way? No. I knew the doctors and the lawyers who didn't like the system. I was always talking, or, you know, being around-- I kept meeting people who didn't like the Pahlavi family, but it was just sort of a general discontent, which took more and more vocal expression in '78. But in '77 I just wasn't seeing it. I was seeing social factors, demographic factors, a general sort of annoyance and irritation and dissatisfaction, but nothing that you could really say was an organized group.

On the other hand, if there had been, the American consul was the last person they would have wanted to be in touch with. I was a symbol of the problem, with the big flag and the coat of

arms and this huge compound and the driver and the police car. I was not the sort of person, ex officio, with whom you would be in contact if you were opposition.

Q: The embassy was also interested in seeing what you could find out about the Kurds. You were requested to develop contacts with them and to determine-- this is a quote-- "determine the potential for supporting dissidents in Iraq". Unquote. There was a large Kurdish population in that part of the country. Did you get to know any of them?

Metrinko: Not in Tabriz. Tabriz is totally Turkish. I knew a lot of Kurds, but not of that sort. I knew a lot of Kurds who were dissatisfied, but they had economic and historical reasons for dissatisfaction. Again it wasn't organized that I could see. And I also had very little time. I could go out to Kurdistan into the Kurdish areas and spend an evening with friends and visit somebody, but again it wasn't-- you know, I wasn't living out there, and you cannot show up in a chauffeur driven car with a flag on it and expect to have the local Kurdish opposition come out and tell you their plans.

Q: These are the Kurds of Iraq?

Metrinko: Yes.



Q: Another area you were to check out was the university scene. How much time did you have to make contacts with students or the president of the University?

Metrinko: I knew a large number of students and faculty professionally and socially.

Q: There was one university in the city or was there another one?

Metrinko: There was Azarabadegan University. There was one branch of my own former Peace Corps school. And, in fact, the director and the deputy director of the branch had both been former students of mine. So I knew them quite well, to go and have dinner with, have lunch with.

But again, up until 1978, you would only get general statements of dissatisfaction or unease or whatever.

END OF SESSION #2

VA

Interviewee: Michael Metrinko

Session #3

Interviewer: William Burr

Alexandria, Virginia

August 29, 1988

Q: The third part of the interview with Michael Metrinko took place in Alexandria, Virginia on August 29, 1988.

At our last meeting, I was going over the list of issues that DCM Jack Miklos instructed you to look into when you established yourself in Tabriz, and one point had to do with the role of the Iranian military. You were instructed to look into the impact of the military bases and installations located around Tabriz, their impact on the local economy. You were also to attempt to make contacts with military personnel and find out something about their attitudes. For example, how dedicated were they to the government. To what extent were you able to make contacts with the Iranian military based in that facility?

Metrinko: The Iranian military personnel?

Q: Yes.

Metrinko: I had certain contacts-- or I had a couple of friends who were doing their army service in Tabriz, but these were people whose families I had known or whom I had known personally

before I got to Tabriz. I had a sort of courtesy visit relationship with the head of the army base, with the head of SAVAK, with the head of the police, but basically it was to pay a courtesy call or see them occasionally at major functions. In general, the higher ranking military officers were under rules or under instructions not to have social relationships with American officials, unless they had a very good reason for it and had clearance for it.

Now I did know quite a bit about the military bases. We had a large MAAG mission, Military Advisory and Assistance Group. And we had an army team house in Tabriz, which I used to visit regularly. We had an air force team house too. And these were places where you could meet some Iranian military. Certainly you could find out a great deal about the American military who were assigned to the Tabriz area.

As the revolution picked up, my relationships with the military got much better, and by early autumn of 1978-- I don't remember the exact date, I'm guessing September more or less-- a small group of military conscripts were assigned to the Tabriz Consulate to protect it. I got to know them very well and got to know their replacements as their duty shifted. I got to know their commanders very well too.

Q: What did you learn about their attitudes towards the Shah and his regime?

Metrinko: There were soldiers, there were military who resented military service, but in general I think certainly the majority of the military that I was in contact with were rather firm supporters, if they thought about it at all. They seemed quite loyal supporters.

Q: In terms of the civilian community in that area, during the period before the revolution, say before January '78 or thereabouts, what did you learn about their attitudes?

Metrinko: Before January of '78 or January '79?

Q: I guess in the course of '77, while you were there, into '78.

Metrinko: The city of Tabriz was not particularly pro-Pahlavi. It never really had been. You have to distinguish between people you would-- I mean, that I would meet, for example, socially. The richer merchants, some of the officials, teachers, people of that sort, the local doctors, the lawyers, people who had business with the consulate, they were generally very circumspect in what they said. What I learned about the regime I usually learned from Iranians who had spent longer periods in the United States as students or from my old friends whom I'd met in the Peace Corps and with whom I maintained contact. My first Peace Corps site fell into the Tabriz consular district and I paid it several visits as a consul. Basically because I enjoyed going