

say, so I said, "They seem to be getting along quite well." I said, "I understand from the newspapers that the Shah has purchased a new house in the United States." This was when the announcement had just come out that the Shah's family or the government of Iran had purchased a house in Lubbock, Texas for the Crown Prince to live in while he was doing military training. And I'd seen it in Parade Magazine. My parents had sent it to me. I said, "I understand that the Shah has just purchased a new house in Texas." The mayor looked at me and said, "Good. Then he'll have a place to go to when we kick him out of Iran." This was not the sort of thing you expected from the mayor of the country's most important-- you know, second most important city. A year before the Shah leaves.

Q: And you reported this?

Metrinko: Oh, yes, absolutely. And I just looked at him when he said that. There wasn't much I could say. If he had said it to me in the privacy of-- you know, some private room in the quiet of night, it would have been one thing. But he said it in the middle of this huge gathering of Iranian military.

Q: And he stayed mayor?

Metrinko: Yes. Sure. But, you know, you'd get that sort of comment or attitude from people all the time. And it just

exploded as time went on.

Q: Now during this period-- back to the fall again-- did you have any contact at all with, say, DCM Charles Naas?

Metrinko: Oh, yes. Sure.

Q: How did they see things, from your perspective? What kind of reading of the situation did they have, say in the fall?

Metrinko: I think they still-- let me put it this way. I saw the Shah as leaving, on his way out. It was just a matter of the time that he went. That's what events were showing me, that they had started showing me that by 1977. By 1978, with the demonstrations of Tabriz, it just proved-- and the riots-- it just proved to me that I had been right, that what close friends had been telling me for the last year, this was the evidence of it. The embassy took an awful lot longer to come to that conclusion, and it probably wasn't until around December of 1978 that they finally realized their Shah was finished.

Charlie Naas was very, very perceptive and very sharp. Had a very good mind about Iran. He had a very open mind too. In fact, in rather sharp contrast to the vast majority of other embassy officers. He had the most, I'd say, open mind of all of them up there. He was willing to listen and he did listen. And he would discuss and he would ask questions. Unlike a number of

the other sort of top layer at the embassy.

Q: Did you have any contact at all with Ambassador Sullivan by this stage? Say, by the fall? Had you met with him, talked about issues with him?

Metrinko: As far as I remember, I only saw Ambassador Sullivan once before I was assigned to Tabriz-- at most once or twice-- and then again not until-- I would see Sullivan when I went back to Tehran and took part in the country team meetings, because when any of the principal officers went back on visits to Tehran, we were expected to show up at the country team meeting. That was normal. I saw him again-- I'm trying to think of when it was. It would have been in the autumn of '78. I'd say roughly October, November. Probably October of '78. And I'm not sure of the exact date when I was summoned back to Tehran.

Q: The circumstances of this?

Metrinko: Yes. For misrepresenting what was happening and for being-- what's the word? Crying Wolf. Spreading stories about the decline of the Pahlavi regime and claiming that the dynasty was on its way out. Now I had written a particular report which caused a great deal of consternation in the embassy. It was a report on a military matter. If true, it would have meant that a significant portion of the Iranian air force had made up its mind

to join forces with the revolution. And I had the report from a very good source. I sent it in. It caused a great deal of consternation. The embassy decided the report was untrue and I was summoned in to be severely reprimanded for rumor mongering.

I found out, of course-- I knew the report was accurate when I sent it in, and I confirmed it after the revolution. When people in the military, who had stayed on in the military, were willing to talk about that particular episode and I had it confirmed by a number of different sources.

Q: What was the episode? Can you talk about that?

Metrinko: I'd been told that there had been a mass resignation from the air force. By pilots and others at the base in Tabriz. That this had been accompanied on the same day by a similar mass resignation from the base in Shiraz. That the commanding general at the Tabriz base had gotten together by phone with the commander in Shiraz, and that they had managed to convince the pilots and the others who had stood in line to resign not to go about the resignation, that things would be arranged and that changes would be made. You know, that basically the generals had sort of gone over. And I reported this. It was all done, by the way, for Iran in absolute secrecy. The resignations were handled by the general and one or two people on his staff. On his personal staff.

Q: The Shah would have known about it then?

Metrinko: Possibly. That the general in Tabriz, the air force general, you know, had sort of made a deal. Don't resign. We're in this together. We'll handle it together, et cetera. And if true, this meant that the military were going over already.

I reported it, went to the embassy. Went to the embassy very quickly too. I did it by-- the one and only time I used a code book, but without going into that--

The embassy decided, after due reflection of a couple of hours, that I was wrong, because they could not get confirmation of it. And I was very severely reprimanded for starting rumors. In fact, I was summoned to Tehran to be reprimanded.

Q: By the ambassador?

Metrinko: Yes. The general about whom I had reported this received a top appointment under Khomeini. [Laughter]

Q: What general was this? I think I know who you mean, but--

Metrinko: Imanian.

Q: Around the same time, late October or early November of '78, three people from the State Department-- Carl Clements, George Griffin from INR, and Stephen Cohen from the Human Rights Bureau,

I think-- traveled to Iran to investigate the situation. Did any of them visit Tabriz?

Metrinko: Yes. Steve Cohen did. We had a great time. Spent a couple of days with him. Took him out to an Iranian village. Took him all around the city. But basically we-- he was a deputy assistant secretary, Steve was.

Q: He was Derian's deputy then?

Metrinko: Yes. And basically took him down, you know, through the bazaar, all through the city. Wandered out with him. Took him to an Iranian village to show him what that looked like. Spent a couple of very fruitful days with him. He went through all my reporting. Basically, I think, came away believing that the collapse was imminent, which is certainly the impression I tried to give him.

Q: Did he give you a sense of current thinking in Washington?

Metrinko: The sense that I had was that Washington didn't know what to think. They were still getting a lot of "there's no problem" reporting, and at the same time they were seeing contradictory things coming out of the press, et cetera. There was so much running around and so much information that Washington just did not know what was really going on.

Q: Did any other American officials visit Tabriz in the fall or winter, besides Cohen?

Metrinko: Certainly from the embassy, yes. From Washington I don't recall.

Q: Who from the embassy? Was that routine?

Metrinko: Routine visits, yes. Now I have to admit that in the course of my year and a half in Tabriz, I never had a visit from anyone in the political section.

Q: Is that so?

Metrinko: Oh, never. They never travelled. Never left North Tehran as far as I could see. The political section was not interested in what was happening in the rest of the country.

END OF SESSION #3

VA

Interviewee: Michael Metrinko

Session #4

Interviewer: William Burr

Alexandria, Virginia

October 27, 1988

Q: The fourth part of the interview with Michael Metrinko took place in Alexandria, Virginia on October 27, 1988.

When we broke off last time, you were talking about the situation in the fall of 1978, and later in November, after General Azhari had banned public meetings, National Front leaders, among others, called for demonstration and strikes on the first and last days of muharram. Do you recall how muharram was observed in Tabriz?

Metrinko: That year honestly I don't. I'm sorry. If demonstrations were called for, I can assume that Tabriz saw demonstrations, but at this point in time I just don't recall. Sorry.

Q: Now what phenomenon of the revolution was apparent to the komiteh? When did they start appearing in Tabriz?

Metrinko: The komiteh started to appear visibly, as opposed to underground komitehs, they started to appear visibly in the period after the surrender so-called, the submission of the armed forces and the government to Khomeini. Bakhtiar was still in



Iran, still in theory the prime minister, but the civil authorities basically went home. The military authorities-- police, gendarmerie, army, the martial law enforcers--basically went back to their barracks for a while and their place was taken by small groups of sometimes armed, sometimes not armed men. For example, the consulate in Tabriz, the protection of the consulate was turned over to one of the local mosques and given to a particular komiteh to watch.

At this point-- this would be late January, early February of 1979-- the komiteh system included just about everybody, anyone you could think of, it became the thing to join. Members were not screened very well, since everybody was part of the revolution. It started to change very rapidly when the komiteh system became armed. That happened within a few days of the groups becoming public, and by February 14th, 15th, 16th, the komiteh system was, while still a bit chaotic, it was in effect all over Iran.

Q: But had they had underground existence in the previous months?

Metrinko: The people in the komiteh, the men, many of them, of course, had taken part in the demonstrations, but many of them were also neighborhood groups. A komiteh-- for example, we're sitting in an apartment building right now. A typical komiteh, if this were Iran, would have been a group of men from this

particular apartment complex, who joined together to both defend the apartment complex and also to monitor and control access to it. And also to carry out instructions of the new religious authorities about the various dwellers in the apartment complex.

Now the komitehs were a really sort of chaotic mixture of all sorts of upper-class, lower class, middle class, workers, factory owners, everything, because for many people it became the way to get yourself immediately onto the bandwagon. Join the komiteh so that you can protect your own house by being a member of the group that's, you know, sort of given the authority to watch that street or watch that alley or watch that part of town.

Let me go back to one thing. The original structure of the komiteh, of the thousands and thousands of komitehs that sprang up or became public, was in the mosque. The local prayer leaders, the local mullahs had at least been very instrumental in setting up the original komitehs, along with all the other revolutionary groups, the Mujahidin, the Fedayeen, groups like that.

Q: You mentioned the Mujahidin and the Fedayeen. Were they very active in the last months of '78? Had they manifested themselves in any way in late '78, early '79, before the transfer of power proper?

Metrinko: Yes, although the problem is, of course, that nobody wore a label on their backs saying "I'm a member of the

Mujahidin." Talking to Mujahidin figures later, in 1979, in the springtime, in the summer, when things were becoming a lot more relaxed, they went on at great length about various acts they had done or activities they were involved in during the course of the 1978 revolutionary year, including things like sort of inflaming crowds, doing other things to cause reaction from crowds against the government. But, yes, they were involved.

They were also involved, of course, publicly. Some of the major Mujahidin figures were very public in Europe.

Q: What kind of a role, if any, was SAVAK playing in Tabriz in the final months of the regime?

Metrinko: That's also difficult to say. The reason is, I knew very few people in SAVAK. I knew a few of the commanders. They, of course, would not walk out on the streets themselves. I didn't really see any of them in the last couple of months. I would assume they were continuing their intelligence role and cooperating with the local police, with the local army, but the actual law enforcement, if you want to call it that, or actual security control of the city of Tabriz was being done by the army, by soldiers, and not by SAVAK or policemen.

Q: I've read that around mid-December military officers who were working with Ardeshir Zahedi, were trying to stage pro-Shah demonstrations around the country. How much evidence of pro-

regime activity or support was there in Tabriz?

Metrinko: Very, very little, including members of the local government. I know there was some pro-Shah activity. I think there was a large demonstration in Tehran in roughly August, September of 1978. A large demonstration was held at Amjadieh stadium, very close to the American Embassy. It was sort of a last gasp. It would have been very silly-- and Iranians are basically not silly people-- it would have been very silly to have taken part in a pro-Shah demonstration by late in 1978. The handwriting was writ large on the wall and so many top regime figures had already run away from their country and from their responsibilities that I can't imagine anyone else being interested in doing it. We're talking about a time when lots of high ranking military, high ranking other officials were shipping out as much of their property as they could from the country. Shipping out their families and basically hightailing it themselves on a whole series of excuses. Or just disappearing.

Q: And this was a subject of great concern in Washington though, the disposition of the military towards the revolution. I think there was here in Washington a hope that there be some kind of accommodation.

Metrinko: Well, there was accommodation. Yes.

Q: You mentioned last time to some extent the Air Force Generals who were--

Metrinko: The Air Force. The Air Force homafars-- large numbers of the Air Force had already gone over to the other side. I also knew a number of individual military who were very pro-revolutionary, who would sit and talk about this, but, of course, had to keep the pretense of the loyalty to the Shah in public. I certainly knew a fair number of Iranian policemen, police officers, who were pro-revolution. And when I think of how many I knew, I can only multiply that by hundreds of thousands around the country. I can remember incidents of the Gendarmerie-- you know, talking to some Gendarmerie figures-- not figures, I mean just some normal Gendarmes out at one of the Gendarmerie posts outside of Tabriz once. In the late autumn it would have been of 1978. And when I was sitting there talking to them by myself, one of them pulled out a picture of Khomeini from his wallet and showed it to me, and gave me a small lecture on the glories of this new religious leader. I'd see that fairly frequently.

There wasn't much reason for a lot of people to be loyal to the Shah. A lot of the benefits never came down to them and they could see what was happening in the streets. And people in Tabriz had never been particularly pro-Shah anyway. They hadn't been in a long time. If they had ever been.

Q: Now I guess in mid-December there were also more shootings of

demonstrators. Khomeini and the National Front together called for another general strike December 18th. Now according to one account, when the strike occurred in Tabriz, about five hundred dissident soldiers with tanks went over to the side of the demonstrators. Did you hear about that or do you recall that episode?

Metrinko: If that is the story that BBC ran, it was a lie. Q: I'm not sure what the source was. Metrinko: Yes. BBC was particularly-- was accused a great deal by the Iranian Pahlevi regime as being pro-revolutionary and lying in their news accounts. I know examples of their misuse of the truth. I think the story about a large number of military, particularly infantry, going over to the revolutionary forces was given out by BBC. Even though they knew it wasn't true, they still broadcast it as news. The only reason I recall it is that I was called up one day in Tabriz by the BBC representative, or one of them, from Tehran, and he told me the story that he had heard a large number of people, officers, from the army base there, et cetera, and others, tanks, the whole bit, had gone over to the revolutionary regime and there had been a great deal of trouble-- a coup attempt-- at the base and could I confirm this story. Well, I told him that as far as I knew it wasn't true. This happened-- this would have been within a couple of days of Christmas.

Q: Yes. That's the day. December 18th. That's the date that I

got.

Metrinko: Okay. But I told him that it wasn't true and I said, you know-- just by chance I was playing cards with three or four officers who had just come over from the base. They were sitting in my kitchen and we were playing cards. These were all Iranians. And I turned to them and asked them if they knew anything about this, and one of them looked at me and said, "Do you think we'd be sitting here playing cards in your kitchen if it were true?" [Laughs] The logic impressed me. You know, they were friends of mine that were out there playing cards and they'd just come from the base. So I told him that I could, you know, confirm that it was not true.

The next-- was it the next-- no, it was later that same evening, I had gone to a Christmas party or a holiday party at the home of a foreign friend in Tabriz. By chance the British head of the British military team was also there. And he came over and asked me if I had heard that crazy story? I said I had and he said, "You know, it's funny. I got a call from Tehran--" He had gotten a call from Tehran from BBC or Reuters, and they had asked if it were true and he had said, no, of course not. You know, because He had been on the base all day. And despite his saying it, the chief British military officer, and my confirming that it was not true, they ran the story as news later that night. Because I listened to the BBC broadcast. That was incredible. But that was one example of what BBC was doing.

Q: Now a few days later, on December 25th, there was an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. A minor attack, but I guess an attack of some sort. I'm not sure what the circumstances were. How much concern did you have about your personal safety or the security of the consulate by this period? You know, late December.

Metrinko: A fair amount, but I was also pretty well protected. And I was constantly being reassured that nothing would happen to the consulate. There was also not much choice by this period of, you know, doing anything else. It was not easy to travel in Iran. Most of the time, when there were large demonstrations like this, it meant that planes were not flying. You certainly couldn't hope to get from Tabriz to Tehran by car. So I simply stayed there.

Now the consulate in Tabriz was subject to a very large, rather violent attack, and I think that was in late December. I'd have to go back and check the dates. But a couple of thousand Iranians did try and storm it and basically they were beaten off with tear gas. But we had quite a bit of damage to the consulate. Things like broken windows. The greenhouse was burned out. The guardhouse was attacked. But I had fifteen or twenty Iranian soldiers who defended the perimeter. Or defended the consulate building. They did it by shooting what must have been about a hundred tear gas bombs off. The demonstrators then went down and burned the Turkish consulate down the street. The



Turkish consul received an apology about a day or two later from one of the leading clergymen of the city, and the Turkish consul was told that they were very sorry, that the crowd had thought it was the American consulate.

Q: What kind of attitudes toward Americans and the U. S. were you encountering by this stage?

Metrinko: Attitudes from the Iranians towards the U. S.?

Q: Yes.

Metrinko: Very mixed. A lot of it was emotional, but there were still an awful lot of Iranians-- there still are-- who had ties to the United States. There was certainly no rancor expressed towards me as a person. Now, some of the clergy did slander me, I know, in speeches and things like that, but I didn't pay attention to that. You know, I had a large number of Iranian friends. Others would come and express their own support or their interest in my welfare, the consulate's welfare. I was being presented petitions and letters by various of the revolutionary types to send to President Carter to explain, you know, "how bad the Shah is," that sort of thing. And the consulate was open off and on. It was open almost all the time, except for those days when there was massive rioting in the city. And people continued to come for visas, they continued to come

for other work. And I also had a very active social life this whole time too.

Q: Now on December 30th the Shah appointed Shapour Bakhtiar as Prime Minister, and Bakhtiar took the job with the condition that the Shah would take a vacation in due course. What did you think about the decision to appoint Bakhtiar? What was your take on that?

Metrinko: I'm trying to remember. To me at the time he was just another one in a long series of attempts that were too late. There was a joke which became very current after the Shah left and when Khomeini was already back. It was already into Bazargan's era. But people talked about, you know, Bakhtiar's appointment as being ten years too late and three months too early.

But a lot of these names-- names like Azhari and Bakhtiar and this person and that person-- these were not particularly well known to the mass of people. They would have been known to the political aficionados in Tehran and to members of the National Front or various other political groups, but most people just didn't know them. He was not, you know, famous in non-political circles.

Q: Apparently when Bakhtiar became Prime Minister, Ayatollah Shariatmadari threw his support to Bakhtiar. So I've read. I'm

not sure that's the case. But in any case, because the Ayatollah was from Tabriz, did that give Bakhtiar much support in the area?

Metrinko: By the time Bakhtiar took power-- and he never really actually had power. He used to go to the office and hope that he could make it inside, I think. By the time he was given the job of Prime Minister, it was far too late. There was a tidal wave going on. And this person or that person, even someone as prominent as Shariatmadari, providing him support, wouldn't have made a bit of difference at that point. It was all just sort of a prelude to Khomeini's return.

It's strange actually. Bakhtiar could have been Khomeini's Prime Minister, just as easily as he was the Shah's. In fact, probably more easily. If he had just waited a little while. But it got him back to France, which is where he really wanted to live anyway.

Q: He sounds like a real Parisian.

Metrinko: His wife is French and his son works for the French Secret Service. His family never lived-- they didn't live in Iran, they were French. Typical Persian high official. Unfortunately. It often was a country ruled by foreigners. Even Persians who were foreign to Persia.

Q: Did you have much contact with Shariatmadari's followers in

Tabriz?

Metrinko: In Tabriz, yes. I knew several people who were very close to him. I was asked at one point if I would go to meet him. This was in the summer of 1978. I passed on the request to the Embassy and they told me, "No." But I never met him personally. I've met various members of his family since then, since the revolution, but I never did meet him personally.

You have to remember one thing about Tabriz. Tabriz was in many ways a small city. It was less than a million in population. When you think of the rather small group of foreigners, of officials, of upper class, whatever you want to call them, the socially prominent in the city, it was rather small. He and members of his family would have known me, just by, you know, knowing who was living in the big house in the center of the city.

Q: Now a few weeks later, in early January of '79, General Robert Huyser arrived in Tehran with the assignment of pulling the military together.

Metrinko: Hah! [Laughs]

Q: That was his mission. And to show U. S. support for Bakhtiar as well, I take it.