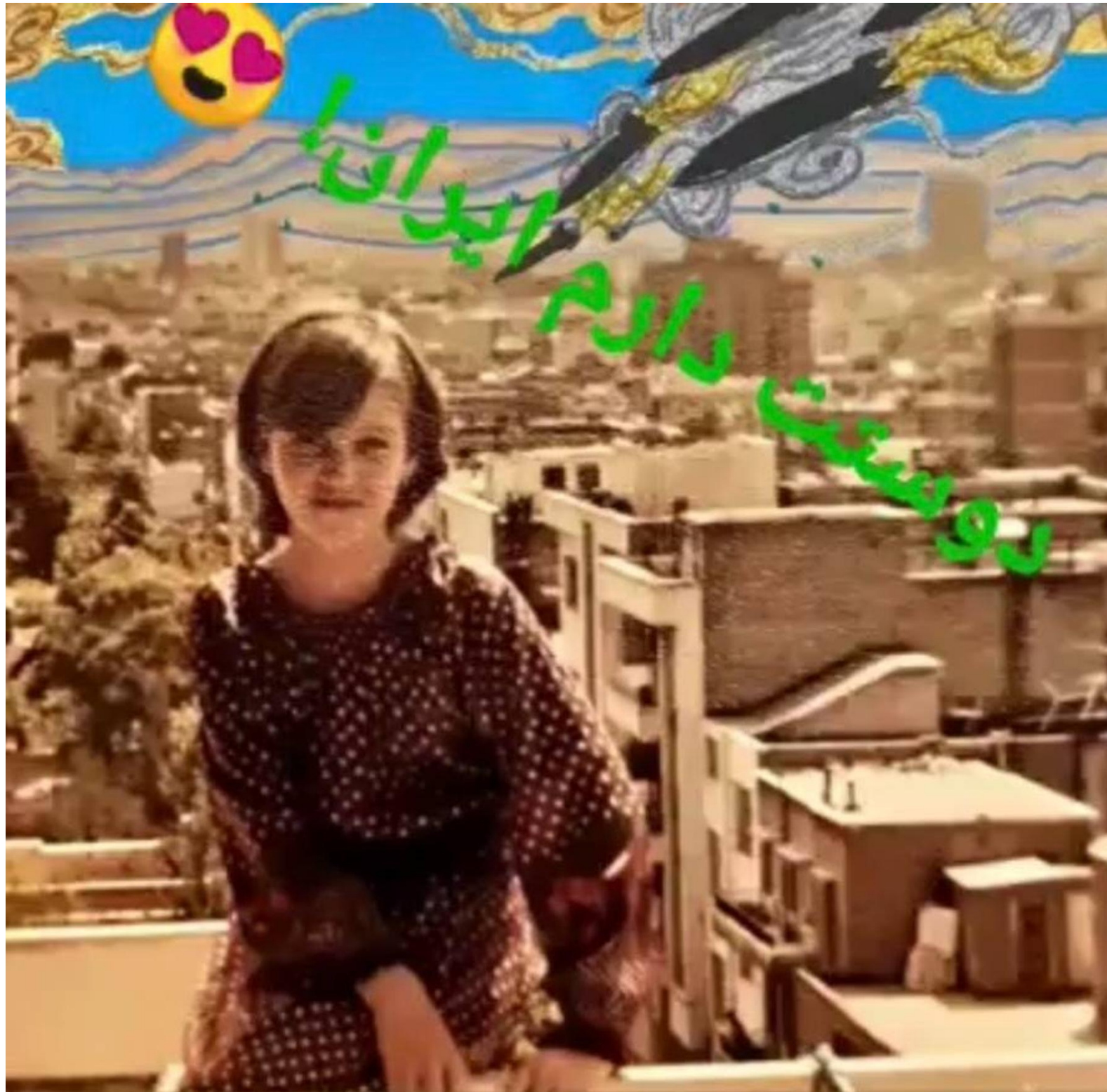




روغنیت دارم
پیدا افتا

1001 Persian Nights

The girl with Moscow's hand
Jamilya Golubitskaya

Жанна Голубицкая

**1001 IRANIAN NIGHTS: GIRL
WITH MOSCOW'S HAND**

«Автор»

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Голубицкая Ж.

1001 IRANIAN NIGHTS: GIRL WITH MOSCOW'S HAND /

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There is always an image of the narrator in Eastern prose, but don't let the pronoun "I" confuse you: my stories are not about me, but about those around me. As in the real One Thousand and One Nights, my eyes and mouth are needed here only to tell you first-hand what I saw with my own eyes. In Russia, they didn't believe that I could remember that time so well more than 40 years later. But the Iranians believed it right away. They said it was no coincidence that I kept my Tehran diary at the age of 9, which is Aisha's age. And they believe that I understood everything exactly the way I'm telling you now. Thank them for that.

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1001 IRANIAN NIGHTS: GIRL WITH MOSCOW'S HAND

Soviet childhood in Islamic Tehran

«One thousand and one» is the Persian aphorism for «very much», «more than enough». Russians would say «a wagon and a small cart», the British «more than enough» or «a whole crapload».

How It All Started: An Introduction to the roaring 1360s

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The Tehran period described below remains only in the dry exposition of textbooks on the history of the Middle East. To date, only three people have written impersonal memories of that controversial and difficult period of Soviet-Iranian cooperation — a former ambassador, a resident and a traitor (as you know, there are no former people in these fields, they are just dead).

The latter was a Soviet intelligence officer until the summer of Tehran in 1982, and in June, before our eyes, he turned into an English spy. In the Soviet Union, he was sentenced to death (in absentia, as he fled to London), and in the West he was declared a fighter against communism, who foresaw the imminent collapse of the rotten Soviet system. It is not known for certain whether he is alive now, but the «democratized» Russia has not forgiven the Soviet traitor and considers him dead.

As for the Soviet ambassador to Iran at that time and the resident of Soviet intelligence, the first died in his own bed, and the second shot himself in his office. But much later than the events described.

The memories of all three «exes» are contradictory for obvious reasons, but they are united in one thing — they all, each in their own way, speak in high words about things of, as Professor Preobrazhensky would say, «cosmic importance.» And now a fourth eyewitness is added to the company of the ambassador, the resident and the defector — a Moscow junior high school student who remembers them all perfectly. Unlike his predecessors, the fourth eyewitness saw all the same things with an untainted child's gaze. When he was little himself, he saw how the little people lived, how they coped, and how they saw this most «cosmically important» thing — not only because of their age, but also because of their ability to influence the situation (which is still classified as «secret» in the Russian Federation).

A nine-year-old schoolgirl went through this story, and as a 49-year-old journalist she put it down on paper — but it's still the same girl, it's just that today she has more life experience. But in her youth, she was much more prescient: in Tehran in the 1978-1982's, she scrupulously kept a personal diary, dated the pictures and carefully put them in a chronological photo album. That's why the atmosphere of that ambiguous time has been recreated down to the smallest detail: despite all its nightmares and bloodshed, the author remembers and loves that time — as we all love our childhood, happy or not.

* * *

Tehran, I'm dreaming about you.

The memories of you are dear to me. That's why I decided to write this book.

When I hear the adhan, the call to prayer, I still imagine a red ball that had heated up during the day and was now quietly smoldering, tiredly rolling over the dark gray broken line of the Elburz. And I see darkness descending on the city— sudden, as always in the east. It was this picture that I watched from the bathroom window day after day.

I have never seen windows in Moscow bathrooms. In Tehran, we had a huge bathroom with a large double hung window facing north. We lived on an elevated floor, and the bathroom had the best view of the northern fashionable areas in the foothills of Damavand (Damavand is a dormant volcano

in the Alborz Mountain range in northern Iran, in Mazandaran province at an altitude of 5870 m above sea level, the highest point of Iran and the entire Middle East).

I liked to lock myself in the bathroom, turning on the water as if I were bathing (my mother forbade me to lean out of the window) and, dangling my legs, sit on the windowsill at sunset, when Tehranis came out with hoses to water the sidewalk in front of their houses.

By evening, the asphalt was hot as a stove, hissing and sending out clouds of steam. Steam rose into the air, mixing with the aromas of spices, the mountains in the north twitched with a haze, lilac-white and light, like the chador of an unmarried Persian woman.

And at the very moment when the smoldering disk was falling heavily behind Damavand, prayer was spreading over the city.

Echoing from speaker to speaker, the penetrating sounds went up to the mountains and disappeared somewhere where our prayers are taken into account.

Meanwhile, the city, bypassing the dull gray twilight, almost instantly, like a Persian girl putting on her chador, threw on a thick fragrant veil of a warm evening. These always sudden Tehran evenings, which turned into velvety nights, seemed to me multidimensional, mysterious and full of secrets. And as soon as a cunning crescent moon hung in the black, motionless sky, looking promisingly at our windows, we lowered the blackout curtains. Since the beginning of the war, this has become an indispensable ritual.

The war began on the last day of the month of Shahrivar and lasted for eight long years. But the evening adhan was still the most exciting.

The Adhan sung by Persian reciters is considered one of the most beautiful in the world. And in me, its sounds, both then and now, almost 40 years later, invariably awaken both anxiety and tenderness, quiet sadness and calm wisdom.... And some other feeling that I can't put a name on. Something similar to the «exit to the upper world,» as esoterics describe it today.

The sounds of the adhan still bring me back to that time and place.

Unfortunately, in all these years I have not been able to share my Tehran stories for various reasons. And hardly anyone, except for those who were there and then, would be able to appreciate their peculiar humor and adventurism.

I remember how my Tehrani friends and I had fun laughing at the story of how my mother brought the top of the Kurdish liberation movement out of hiding.

And a few years later, when I tried to make my peers in Moscow laugh with the same incident, they just stared at me, wondering if I was completely crazy or just an impudent liar.

But since I've carried my Tehran stories through almost four decades and they still bother me, it means that they need to be told. Moreover, the statute of limitations has long expired.

I lived in Tehran from 1357 to 1361.

The year 1357, according to the Solar Hijri, occurred in Iran on the first day of the month of Farvardin — March 21, 1978, by our standards.

And the Iranians celebrated their new 1361 on March 21, 1982.

I was born at the end of 1970, so it's more convenient for me to remember how old I am using the Solar Hijri. I was seven in 1357 and ten in 1360. The first jubilee in my life, the round date of the Solar Hijri, is a beautiful title for a book. But it describes not one year, but almost five.

These years were crucial for Iran — and for me too, because I observed all the Iranian «fractures» from the inside.

Our childhood games intertwined with reality, reflected it, sometimes forcing us to grow up ahead of time.

In 1358, I was eight, and I dreamed of a thick and beautiful American notebook with steel rings, which I spotted in a Tehran bookstore. Soviet children never dreamed of such things. It was quite expensive, and Dad said he would only buy it for me for something useful. I quickly blurted out that I was going to keep a personal diary. Dad bought a notebook, and I really had to start the diary.

That treasured notebook is still with me, and almost 40 years later, it began to irresistibly beg to be turned into a book. No wonder they say that times repeat themselves.

It can be seen that the wheel of history has turned, and what happened to Iran from 1357 to 1361, and to us from 1979 to 1982, is becoming relevant again.

Reference:

Tehran is the capital of the Islamic Republic of Iran (until 1935, Persia was one of the oldest states in the world, until 1979 Iran was a monarchy).

Shah of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who ruled the country from 1941 to 1979, became the last monarch of Iran. The Shah's policy was aimed at actively modernizing the country and was considered "pro-Western" in religious circles. During the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Tehran became known as the "Paris of the East," and Shah Reza himself played a prominent role in the secular life of the whole world. All three wives of Shah Pahlavi were trendsetters not only in their own country, but also abroad – secular beauties from all over the world looked up to their exquisite dresses. For the first time in the history of the Persian monarchy, Shah Reza Pahlavi officially crowned a woman, his third wife Farah. Shahbanu (Empress) Farah Pahlavi will turn 80 on October 14, 2018.

Shahbanu actively developed culture, education, medicine in the country, defended the rights of women – in particular, she freed them from the mandatory wearing of "chador" – Muslim women's clothing common in Iran. This turned out to be one of the "last drops" in the cup of indignation of those who did not like that the shah's family was leading the country away from the titular religion.

As a result of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, spiritual leader Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. The shah's family and most of the intelligentsia fled the country. As is usually the case, the country, exhausted by the revolution, was immediately attacked by the territorial claims of its closest neighbor, Iraq. The Iran-Iraq armed conflict, known as the First Gulf War, broke out.

On November 4, 1979, Tehran students, followers of Ayatollah Khomeini, broke into the US Embassy in Tehran and took 66 people hostage. The reason was that the United States gave an entry visa to the fugitive Shah Pahlavi for medical treatment on their territory.

On January 1 and December 27, 1980, attacks took place on the USSR embassy, but there were no hostages.

But even then, many world politicians were sure that in Iran, which was already accustomed to the Western way of life, Islamization would fail miserably and the Shah would return, having received Western help (this had already happened in the 50s of the XX century).

However, today Iran has been an Islamic republic for almost 40 years.

Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi died in exile in Cairo in 1980.

*Shahbanu Farah lives with her older children and grandchildren in the United States, where in 2003 she published her memoirs, *Selfless Love*, about her love for the motherland and for the late Shah. Formally, in Iranian immigration circles, the official heir to the Persian throne in exile is the eldest son of the Shah's couple, Reza Pahlavi. Informally, the diaspora considers Shahbanu Farah, who is approaching her 80th birthday, to be the head of the Pahlavi house. The living legend of the Persian monarchy tells her grandchildren about Iran and is very worried that they have never seen their homeland. Shahbanu herself and her children have not seen their native Tehran since that fateful year 1358.*

Iran lives according to the solar calendar (the Solar Hijra is used only in Iran and Afghanistan, all other Muslim countries use the classical Islamic calendar – the Lunar Hijra).

According to the Solar Hijra, the Islamic Revolution won in Iran in 1357 (February 1979), 1358 (03/21/1979 – 03/21/1980) became a transitional year, and on the last day of Shahrivar 1359 (09/22/1980), the war with Iraq began, which lasted 8 years.

After 6 years, it turns out that, despite the hostage-taking of American diplomats in Tehran and the mutual hatred of the peoples, for all 8 years the United States secretly supplied Iran with weapons

and spare parts for military equipment. And the Soviet Union, openly condemning Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran, has been arming Iraq for 8 years, bound by the 1972 treaty of friendship and cooperation and its own interests in the Middle East region.

On March 20, 2024, the month of Farwardin of 1403 began in Iran.

Legends and Myths of the Soviet Embassy in Tehran

In 1978, the grandest adventure of my childhood awaited me — a trip to fabulous Persia, which in the process turned into a revolutionary, and then Islamic and war—torn Iran. My dad was sent there for work, and he took my mom and me with him. If for my parents, who were in their early 30s at the time, a period of 5 years was just a «long business trip,» then for me, who had lived in the world for only 8 years, it was not a trip, but a part of life comparable in importance to the previous one. It is believed that a child begins their «journey into society» (observes, evaluates and absorbs the vibrations of the environment not only inside their family, but also outside it), from about the age of three. That is, at the time of my departure to Tehran, out of my eight years, I had lived 5 conscious years in Moscow. And then exactly the same amount in Tehran. Thus, by the age of 13, Moscow and Tehran were equally familiar and unfamiliar to me. That is why I call the Iranian «five-year plan» not a trip, but an important part of my childhood, which influenced me no less than the Soviet part of it.

Now we can admit that it was me who brought two bottles of Soviet wheat vodka to the territory of the young Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. They were in the bodies of two large walking dolls from the Detsky Mir on Dzerzhinsky. I turned nine the day before, and the dolls from my girly dreams were given to me for my birthday. I held the toys to my chest so touchingly at the customs inspection that it didn't even occur to the Iranian border guards to check if they had anything in their stomachs.

We were just returning to Tehran from vacation. Before the Islamic Revolution, there was no need for such smuggling: the Iranian capital was full of restaurants and liquor shops. But after the new government introduced prohibition, Russian vodka became the best gift to colleagues from homeland.

Then I was unknowingly used: of course, I didn't know about the alcoholic stuffing of my favorites. And I learned about my feat in the name of Russians' love for booze much later. At the time, I was just surprised by the sudden generosity of my parents. Before my trip to Iran, I dreamed more than anything of a wonderful, magical doll that can walk if you put it on the floor and take it by the hand! I saw one first at a friend's place, and then several of them in the window of Detsky Mir, and I lost my peace. But then, no matter how much I begged, they didn't buy me a walking doll. After all, Lena, the one who is a little shorter and less elegant, cost as much as twelve rubles. And gorgeous Nina—all sixteen!

But after living in pre-revolutionary Tehran for a year, I saw and felt so many different «barbies» who bent and sang and had their own houses and cars that dolls from Detsky Mir no longer struck my imagination. But Hodja Nasreddin was right when he said: to get something, you have to lose interest in it! When I stopped dreaming about a walking doll, they suddenly bought me two at once — Lena and Nina. I was allowed to take them with me to Tehran, despite the fact that they took up a lot of space, and a year ago, my mother took almost all the toys I had collected out of the suitcase. And I don't know which one of my parents packed Lena and Nina for the road.

My parents and I lived in the embassy in the center of Tehran, where the Russian ambassador Alexander Griboyedov was killed in 1829 (later I will explain this point, which causes heated debate among those who are familiar with the history of the death of the Russian classic), and in 1943 the «big three» met. We, the embassy children, who played on the historic lawns, knew a little more than ordinary children: where Stalin spent the night, what Roosevelt drank, how Churchill had fun, where Griboyedov's imperial porcelain had gone, and what British intelligence was up to again.

Before the Islamic Revolution, the Tehran address of the Soviet embassy seemed strange to some — «USSR Embassy, Tehran-Iran, Churchill Street, corner with Roosevelt Avenue, 39.»

The Soviet embassy was located with one side «on Churchill» and on the other «on Roosevelt» due to the fact that during the legendary Tehran Conference in 1943, Roosevelt stayed at the Soviet embassy — in the very building where the conference itself was held. And Churchill spent the night at his embassy, which, as our diplomats joked, «is always close by.» Old-timers in Tehran say that the

diplomatic missions of the USSR and Great Britain, despite the absence of any obvious ties, always stayed close to each other in Persia. And as soon as the Soviet, and before it, the tsarist diplomatic mission, slightly changed its location, an English neighbor soon appeared nearby under some pretext. Even Her Majesty's Ambassador ordered his summer residence to be set up next to Zargandeh, where we moved for the summer, led by our Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary. The British Embassy in Tehran is still located next door to the Russian one.

Of course, after such dignified overnight stays, the three streets closest to the epicenter of the historic event received the names of the participants of the «big three». The main entrance to our territory was from Churchill Street, and the small entrance was from Roosevelt Avenue, which is why the embassy's address sounded so strange. And opposite our small entrance, on the opposite side of Roosevelt Avenue, is the US Embassy.

Of course, Stalin was also involved: he, as we joked, lay directly perpendicular to Churchill.» The street on which our embassy club stood was named after him, in the building of which the Soviet leader spent the night in '43. It started from the main gate of the embassy and went towards the elegant Naderi shopping Avenue, named after the Persian Nader shah.

Given the close proximity of the Tehran «diplomatic enclave,» we were literally over the fence on that fateful November day when 66 employees of the American embassy were taken hostage. And on that joyous January day when they were released (the capture took place on November 4, 1979, and they were all released on January 20, 1981). For 52 of those captured (with the exception of 14 previously released women, black people, and one gravely ill American), their own embassy became a prison for 444 long days.

And even though the Americans were ideologically considered our enemies and were going to boycott our 1980 Olympics, we felt sorry for them. Just like us, they had families, children, and a school.... And then there were only hostages left, and we unwittingly projected their fate for ourselves. Although before the seizure of their embassy, it seemed to us that what was happening in Tehran did not particularly concern us foreigners. It was like watching an action movie through the bars of the embassy gate. Moreover, the first attempt to seize the American embassy took place under the Shah, in February 1978, and was unsuccessful. The attackers were quickly neutralized, and the local press accused a tiny group of «young people confused by communist ideas» from among students at the University of Tehran of organizing «hooliganism.» We believed it, because a year (minus one day) before the seizure of the American embassy, on November 5, 1978, the entire Soviet diplomatic corps watched in fascination as a student demonstration smashed restaurants and shops selling alcohol on Lalezar Street next to us. They poured alcohol right on the road, and our whole neighborhood breathed the fumes of that demonstration for a long time. The demonstrators threw several cans of imported beer over the fence of our embassy, shouting: «Choke on your poison, shaitans!»

The «Shaitans» embodied by our guards gladly drank these cans to Khomeini's health. Of course, good German beer was never seen in the Soviet Union.

After that, a platoon of the Shah's army was stationed on our territory for some time. The young soldiers, although they were Shah's, apparently also suspected shaitans in us. The girls and I went to the commandant's office on purpose to tease them, but they stood with stone faces, like steadfast tin soldiers. And we were very surprised when, three days later, we saw that the Shah's soldiers were kicking a ball around the playground with our boys. They didn't react to the girls' harassment, but they couldn't resist the offer to play football. After a friendly match, the soldiers even let our boys hold their guns.

Then the military government appointed by the Shah allegedly managed to stop the young revolutionaries by explaining to them the world rules of diplomatic relations. And we hoped that they would no longer attempt to assassinate foreign diplomats, bearing in mind our inviolability. But that was not the case, exactly a year later everything happened again.

The very next day after the capture of the American hostages, on November 5, 1979, the invaders descended onto our British neighbors. The windows of our apartment building overlooked the territory of the British embassy, and then we all, young and old, poured out onto the balconies and watched the attack with our own eyes. As the crowd stormed the gates, smoke belled from the main building of the British mission, as the British burned their secret documents. Then the gates collapsed and the black crowd, like a huge cloud, covered all the English lawns. It was especially scary when the invaders noticed us on the balconies, with cameras in our hands, and shouted: «Why take pictures, you're next, you'll see for yourself!» Fortunately, they did not take the British hostage, but they destroyed the embassy. They then spent a long time tinkering on their territory, repairing the damage.

We were nearby on the January day when the Shah's family fled the country (January 16, 1979), and on the February day when the spiritual leader of the revolutionaries, Ayatollah Khomeini, returned to Iran after 15 years of exile, and the Islamic revolution was declared victorious. At that time, our people were surprised that it took only a year for the elder Khomeini to overthrow the Shah, whose power seemed unshakable despite all the unrest.

Since January 1, 1980, in just one year we have experienced three attacks on our own embassy and the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war with endless airstrikes, the eerie wail of sirens and blackout. In the first months of the war, Iraq did not tire of bombing the Iranian capital, and it did so from airplanes with red stars on the side, bought from the USSR.

But for us, five children who, for purely familial reasons, were not evacuated to the Soviet Union, because of our age, all this were just everyday life «in the neighborhood,» and our children's games involuntarily echoed the harsh reality of non-children. So instead of the traditional cops and robbers for children, we played Khomeinists and Tudeists (supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Workers' Party of Iran TUDEH). And when Iraq started bombing us, we started playing «Saddam.» There were plenty of topics for outdoor games for kids, for whom someone else's revolution and war had become a daily routine.

The Islamic Revolution has also changed the toponymy of our area. After their victory, we, along with the French embassy, ended up at 39 Neauphle-le-Château. However, the new regime renamed our Churchill Street in the French manner not at all to please French diplomats, but in honor of the Paris suburb that briefly sheltered the fugitive Imam Khomeini. The Ayatollah lived in this town in the northern French department of Ile-de-France for three months in 1979, when Iraq had already sent him away, and Iran was not expecting him back yet. Straight from there, the holy elder returned to Tehran, thus marking the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran.

On December 28, 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which began on December 25, ended, and on January 1, 1980, early in the morning, crowds of bearded men broke into the Soviet embassy in Tehran, tearing down the gates. First of all, they tore down and set fire to the Soviet flag. And a white banner with a black inscription «Allahu Akbar!» was hoisted on a high flagpole in front of the central entrance to the USSR Embassy.

While the Soviet diplomats were walking away from New Year's Eve, the barbarians smashed everything in their path and threw stones at our windows, shouting that they were «Afghan patriots outraged by the military invasion of their homeland by Shaitan Shuravi.»

At that time, the pasdars (pasdaran-e-engelob — guards of the Islamic Revolution) came to the aid of the guards of our embassy and managed to repel the attack fairly quickly, preventing particularly large-scale destruction. Only the entire commandant's office was blown to smithereens: furniture, telephones, security cameras, an alarm system — everything was blown to pieces.

The gates were later repaired, the windows were put in, the garbage was removed, and it was assumed that this was provocation. So far, they only wanted to scare us. Most likely, the attackers themselves received orders from above not to aggravate the situation. Otherwise, why would the

Pasdars help the «little shaitan» embodied by us?! And what could a dozen of our guards do without them against an angry mob of religious fanatics?!

Our diplomatic corps gathered for an emergency meeting, where they announced that so far we are only being scared, and the worst, of course, is ahead. It all started the same way with the Americans, who are still being held hostage.

We children learned about what was happening around us from our parents' conversations and discussed it among ourselves as urgent news — there were no others.

On the second day of the new 1980 Olympic year for Moscow, rumors began to spread that repeated attacks were expected in Moscow, and our ambassador received a command to send all children and women who had not been sent by Moscow, but who had come as wives and mothers, to the Union on the next flights.

The adults again remembered the unfortunate American diplomats who were locked up two steps away from us, in our embassy district of Tehran, and recognized that this measure was justified. Apparently, a second attack on our embassy should be expected very soon.

We didn't know then that the first attempt to seize our embassy would take place on April 27, the anniversary of the Afghan revolution and two days after the American military operation to rescue the hostages had failed miserably. At that time, our embassy would be wrecked a little more than on January 1, 1980, but Khomeini's pasdars would once again help our guards escort the rampaging barbarians away.

But next new year, on the anniversary of the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan, no one will help us anymore.

On December 27, 1980, a crowd hundreds of times larger than the one a year ago broke into our territory, once again demolishing the gates, which had already been reinforced twice over the past year and eventually became completely metal. This time, the situation was much more serious. Afghan refugees, outraged by the occupation of their country, have joined the students, religious fanatics and migrant workers.

Gigantic crowds of angry people, like clouds of black locusts, destroyed everything in their path shouting «Marg bar Shuravi!» («Death to the Soviets!» — Persian), «Marg bar Amrika!» (Death to the Americans!) and «Allahu Akbar!».

They pushed through the barbed wire on our fence, feeling no pain and ruthlessly throwing and crushing each other. It was a small dogpile, terrifying in its folly, armed with clubs, stones and knives, and in linen trousers, such as are worn by holiday-makers today. They would resemble fairy-tale robbers if it wasn't so scary.

As we were later told, the news took three seconds on the Soviet «Vremya» program: «In Tehran, the USSR state flag was insulted, and the embassy building was damaged.» In fact, the invasion lasted for several hours.

The attackers slashed and burned our red flag, and then, in the middle of the working day, broke into the main building of the embassy, into the very reception hall where the historic Tehran meeting of the big three took place in 1943. To begin with, they smashed a marble memorial plaque dedicated to this historic event, and then they began to destroy everything that they could lay their hands on. They smashed a collectible porcelain set, from which Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt helped themselves in '43, and knocked down a chandelier that still remembered Griboyedov.

Accustomed lately to bombing, blackout and attacks, Soviet diplomatic workers stole fragments of that rare lighting device right under the noses of the raging fanatics to have as keepsakes. But none of our people took the valuable paintings from the famous embassy hall home, and the barbarians cut up those rarities with knives.

In Iran, according to the accepted chronology of the solar calendar (Hijri), the year 1359 was then, it came on the first day of the month of Farwardin, which to us is March 21, 1980. It became the most fruitful in upheavals: by the beginning of the Iranian 1360th, which according to the

Gregorian calendar fell on March 21, 1981, the attacks on foreign embassies, the civil war caused by the revolution, local civil strife and political assassinations had already died down — and exhausted by all this, Iran plunged headlong into the war that began in September 1980 with Iraq. But back then, no one even imagined that it would exhaust the country for eight long years.

We lived in the same embassy in the center of Tehran where Russian Ambassador Alexander Griboyedov was assassinated in 1829, and from November 28 to December 1, 1943, the first conference of the «big three» leaders of the three countries — Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill — was held during the Second World War. There was a chandelier in the embassy's reception hall that remembered Griboyedov. All this was told to each newly arrived employee, and they, in turn, shared the place they had come to in letters to their relatives who remained in the Union. From time to time, there were particularly meticulous history experts who claimed that in 1829 there was no Russian embassy in the place where it is now. This means that neither Griboyedov could have been killed there, nor the chandeliers that remembered him could have hung there.

Of course, I am not a historian, and I have not studied the history of the death of Russian Ambassador Griboyedov in Tehran in depth, but I have been «soaking» in Tehran's realities for the whole five years, even as a child. Accordingly, without claiming to be the ultimate truth, I am passing on how this story was presented to us, the children of the staff of the USSR Embassy in Iran.

For all the Soviet people who worked in Tehran in the 70s and 80s of the last century, Griboyedov was not just a writer from a school curriculum, but a man who served the Motherland in the same place where they were. Even the embassy's kindergartens were shown the monument in front of the old embassy building and explained who it was and why it was sitting there. It was said that the Russian classical poet, composer, and friend of the Decembrists, Alexander Griboyedov, was also a diplomat, served as the envoy of the Russian Empire to Persia, and it was in Tehran that he died in the name of duty and Homeland.

As children, we associated him with our current ambassador, Vladimir Mikhailovich Vinogradov, the most important person in the embassy, and we understood how important and responsible, but also dangerous, his post was.

It is likely that this heroic picture had its own ideological and topographical distortions in favor of the morality of the builders of communism, but the truth is still somewhere nearby.

The bronze Alexander Sergeyevich Griboyedov is still sitting in his usual place in Tehran — in the embassy park, in an armchair opposite the entrance to the former main and now memorial hall of the old embassy building.

And near the entrance to this hall there are two memorial plaques, reminding of the events that took place in this place, which turned the course of history. One of them is dedicated to the legendary meeting of the «big three» in Tehran in 1943, and the other reports that Envoy Alexander Sergeyevich Griboyedov died here in the early morning of February 11 (January 30, old style), 1829, at the hands of an angry mob that attacked the Russian embassy.

Although, admittedly, there has been a debate among historians about the exact location of the Russian embassy in the 19th century and, accordingly, where exactly Griboyedov met his death, has been going on for the second century. The fact is that after the massacre in the building of the Russian mission in 1829, there was not a single living witness to the tragedy — with the exception of one traitor, who may have set it all up.

The few surviving documents of that time indicate a certain Baghe Ilchi Lane (translated from Farsi as the Ambassador's Garden) as the location of the very «mansion of the Russian mission», where the fatal February day in 1829 took place. According to these sources, the house of one of the Iranian nobles was located in this alley, which was provided to Griboyedov and the accompanying delegation of Russian diplomats only for the duration of their visit to Tehran (the permanent residence of the Russian diplomatic mission at that time was located not in Tehran, but in Tabriz, which at that time was the capital of Persia).

When I returned to Tehran for the first time 21 years after leaving in 2003, and again after 33 years, in 2015, I both times honestly asked the Tehran old-timers where the pile (lane) was located. But no one remembered such an alley. Nor could they show me the mansion, or even the place where it once stood. The most well-informed know only that «it seems that the Russian ambassador was killed somewhere in the area of the Bozorg bazaar.» But the huge Bozorg, in fact, is a city within a city in the very center of Tehran, and it begins not far from the street where our embassy was located during the meeting of the Big Three in 1943, and during the five years that I lived in Tehran, where it still operates today.

After the assassination of Griboyedov's envoy, the Persian Shah sent his own grandson as a messenger to the Russian tsar — a sign of reconciliation with many expensive gifts, among which was the famous Shah diamond (an 88.7 carat yellow diamond, mined in India, which first owner acquired around the year 1000). After receiving such a generous gift, Nicholas I replied to Shah Fath Ali's envoy that «the bloody incident has been forever forgotten.» In light of this, the new Russian ambassador, who replaced Griboyedov, who was literally torn to shreds, did not clarify the painful moments in the form of the exact location and circumstances of his predecessor's death. And he did not tell his subordinates to do it either, so as not to stir up the shaky Russian-Persian world once again.

The diplomats of Soviet Russia, who replaced the tsarist diplomatic mission after the revolution, allegedly inherited this position from their predecessors. Although, more likely, they weren't particularly interested in the specific site of the massacre. However, one of the Soviet ambassadors of the Brezhnev era, in order not to remind Iranian official visitors of the barbarity committed by their side, even removed the monument to Griboyedov from the entrance to the memorial hall. The bronze Alexander Sergeevich was then moved to the staff's apartment building — fortunately, not for long.

And the mansion where the massacre that claimed Griboyedov's life took place was most likely destroyed by the Persians themselves. For the same purpose, to not keep painful memories or pour salt on the barely healed «wounds» of Russian-Persian relations.

And since that street and that house have disappeared without a trace from the map of Tehran, I personally see no point in stirring ashes in disputes about the precise coordinates of the death of the Russian ambassador on the map of Tehran. Moreover, my novel does not pretend to be an accurate historical guide. The most important thing for me is that both Soviet and now Russian diplomats cherish the memory of Alexander Sergeyevich Griboyedov — a monument, a memorial plaque, and a separate lesson is still dedicated to the tragic massacre at the Russian mission in the embassy school.

And today, for compatriots working in Tehran, as well as for their family members, including the youngest, Alexander Griboyedov is not just a classic, but also a colleague who died in the line of duty.

It is no coincidence that when the Soviet embassy was attacked, now in my memories — first on January 1, and then on April 26 and December 27, 1980 — the entire Soviet colony first recalled the circumstances of Griboyedov's death. Angry crowds of religious fanatics also rushed in, destroying everything and everyone in their path. And here is the irony of fate — it was them who dropped and smashed the famous «Griboyedov» chandelier in 1980.

But where did it come from?

Again, without pretending to break the ultimate truth, I'll just tell you what was said about it at the USSR Embassy in Tehran in the 70s and 80s of the past century, and what was told to us, the children, so that we could feel the historical spirit of the place we are in, and could be proud and feel involved in great things. And, therefore, be more interested in native history.

Shortly after the tragic death of the Russian ambassador, the Russian diplomatic mission finally moved from Tabriz to Tehran, as the shah's court moved there and, accordingly, moved the capital. Along with other mission property, the so-called «Griboyedov» chandelier was also moved from the old residence to the new one. At the embassy school, we were told that the Russian tsar awarded his envoy to Persia with this huge and bulky structure made of especially valuable crystal for some

special merits. We were even taken to the memorial hall to look at this chandelier as a museum exhibit, because it was so old that it even remembered candles and gas burners. And hanging in the negotiating room of the Russian embassy, it «watched» many people who have gone down in history — from its donor, Russian Emperor Nicholas I, the Persian Shah Fath Ali and his son Prince Mirza Abbas, with whom the diplomat Griboyedov negotiated, to all subsequent rulers of Persia and Russia's Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Envoys in Tehran.

The urban — or rather, embassy — legends passed down from one embassy to another were not only about the chandeliers and fine china sets in the memorial hall, but also about the oldest embassy building.

In the first months after my arrival, I was enlightened about this by a nine-year-old friend, who at that time had been living with her parents at this embassy for the third year.

The Soviet embassy built a new office building only in the 70s of the past century. Before that, all our diplomats huddled in one room, which was rich in history, but not too spacious. At that time, the current memorial hall served not only for formal receptions, as it is now, but was an ordinary working space of the embassy.

As a friend told me, local construction workers were invited to erect a new office building, which was planned to be connected to the old building by a long corridor, and our staff monitored them in large numbers. From morning to evening, the site was crowded with a whole bunch of people — Soviet construction specialists, representatives of the economic and engineering departments of the embassy and the office of the military attaché. And all of them, according to her friend, saw the dead with their own eyes!

The remains of several people were discovered immediately when the bulldozer had just begun to dig the excavation.

— Apparently, these were the freshest of corpses! Elka suggested in an ominous whisper. — And then they went on to dig out skeleton after skeleton! It's been a long time coming. At that place, a hundred dead were buried in the ground! Now I'm afraid to go there at all!

— But how do our dads work there? I was worried. «They must be scared!»

— What's it to them? Elka waved her hand. «They're sitting on their bones and scribbling their papers.»

A friend told me that the embassy doctor at the time suggested that the excavated remains had been lying in the ground for several decades. The staff was alarmed and reported this to the ambassador. After learning what was going on, the ambassador gathered the entire team and officially forbade discussing this topic even among themselves. The case was silenced, so no one really knows who these corpses are or where they came from. But the rumors, despite the ban under threat of deportation to the Soviet Union, were still passed from mouth to mouth, from generation to generation of Soviet diplomats and embassy children....

Impressed, before going to bed, I told my dad about the corpses under his workplace. I didn't even bother scaring Mom, but I felt it my duty to warn Dad. However, he took my warning lightly and said that it was all «children's fairy tales.»

It is possible that some of what was passed from mouth to mouth to each newcomer was actually more of an «urban legend» and an embassy story. And what was told about the joint Persian-Russian story to Soviet children at the school at the Soviet embassy, which performs its diplomatic function in the very place where this story unfolded, was ideologically «retouched.» But we didn't think about it: I think at that age, the history of relations between Persia and Russia would not have been interesting to me at all if I had been anywhere else in the world. But in Tehran, every story gained a special charm simply from the fact that you live your ordinary life right where such great things once happened.

A landmark in the sense of local «myths and legends» of the Soviet embassy in Tehran was Zargandeh, a place in an expensive area in the north of Tehran, where the summer residence of the Soviet embassy was located (and is located to this day). We moved there from May to September. Our

people said about Zargandeh that, unlike the embassy's territory, it was «a piece of Soviet land», so these 20 hectares in an expensive picturesque area at the foot of the mountains were not provided to us by the Iranian side for summer residences, but even before the revolution of 1917, our Cossacks won from the Persians in a card game, whose brigade was stationed there. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the freelance units of the Cossack brigades of the Russian tsar actually served for hire in the Persian army, and their old stables were even preserved in Zargandeh. The Shah began to hire them after twelve Don Cossack regiments, two Black Sea regiments, Cossacks from the Caucasian line and several hundred Astrakhan Cossacks defeated his army in the Russian-Persian War of 1826-1828. Then, in February 1828, Russia and Persia signed the Turkmenchay Peace Treaty and never fought with each other again.

Whether it's true or a myth, the Iranians avoided Zargandeh even during their revolution — that is, almost 70 years later. In the most acute political moments, they broke into the territory of the USSR embassy in the center of Tehran and destroyed it, but never in Zargandeh! Although they knew perfectly well that the same people were sitting there as in the embassy, along with their families. We believed that such an attitude was the respect of the Persians for gambling debt, and it was difficult to even think of another reason.

In our memory, only once did two local young men climb over the Zargandeh fence and climb into the cottage of one of our families. Everything was turned over, but nothing was stolen. They were probably hapless thieves who believed that Soviet diplomats lived very rich lives. But as they went through all their stuff, they didn't find anything interesting for themselves.

«GEUPEOT» and Shahbanu

Immediately upon arrival from Moscow, Dad was given an official Peugeot, which was very luxurious for its time. Our embassy has just purchased a batch of brand-new white Peugeot cars. I got into a foreign car for the first time in my life and I really liked everything. Especially the tape recorder, into which you could insert a cassette and drive to your favorite music.

In my very first letter from Tehran to my grandmother, I wrote: «We're fine, it's warm here, and we've been given an GEUPEOT car.» In Russian an inverted form of the French word «Peugeot» sounds like the swear word «ass».

I still don't understand what's wrong with that: it was difficult for a Soviet child to remember the French name. After reading the letter, my grandmother told my mother that the girl in my person had the wrong priorities in life:

— In her understanding, good is when it's warm and there's something to carry your ass!

I was deeply impressed by how the local «khanums,» as our people called them, reacted to minor accidents they created, and they created them with enviable regularity. Even after the revolution, Teheran women did not stop driving cars, except that now they did it with their heads covered. The rules of the road in Tehran then and still are truly Asian — that is, there's none. The main argument is the horn, whoever beeps louder gets their way. The khanums kept up with the men in terms of brazen driving, and if they caused the screeching of brakes and the ominous screech of metal to be heard, they immediately leaned out the window with the most radiant smile and waved sweetly at the victim. After that, even the angriest male Tehran motorist would refuse the help of a traffic policeman and would generously forgive the delicate woman. Almost once a week, my dad humorously described how another local car enthusiast flew into him. I don't think he would have had so much fun in Moscow. But our hospital even had a separate budget item — the repair of official cars affected by khanums.

My parents then, for a long time, brought up this «Geupeot» every time they didn't like the way I was behaving.

After this incident, I began to diligently record the intricate names of cars in my notebook, a dictionary that was always with me, as my dad taught me. The pocket dictionary was used so that I could write down English words and expressions that were new to me, whenever I heard them. At that time, English was still the language of business communication in Tehran out of habit, so my travel notebook was regularly replenished. At home, I looked up the meaning of unfamiliar words in a thick English-Russian dictionary, carefully entered their translation into a notebook, and they were stored in my memory for the rest of my life — at least, dad hoped so, trusting the methodology that he himself was taught by, as he said, «a great man.» Well, I wrote down the names of the cars so that I could get one when I grew up. The ones I liked the most were mostly khanum women's. The most beautiful of them drove long shiny American cars. Their yellow, red, cerulean, and even gold Fords, Dodges, Cadillacs, and Chevys reminded me of strange birds!

Reading these names now, I am once again convinced that in the 80th year I was an absolutely happy child. I sincerely saw no reason to doubt that, having received my DOSAAF license at the age of 18 (my dad told me about him), I would choose between a Ford Thunderbird, Cadillac Deville, Chevrolet Camaro and Corvette.

I liked the Dodgers less. Who knew that by the time I grew up, the mysterious DOSAAF would disappear into thin air like a ghost, and the «khanum» cars from my childhood would become collector's rarities and would hardly ever be affordable for me.

But thanks to my grace, our Peugeot has remained an «ass» forever. Even my mother called it that, despite the fact that my unintentional mistake caused her to have indecent associations.

The Shah's Tehran was an amazing Babylon of its time: it was especially loved by «firmies» from Germany and Turkey, they owned part of the shops, many were married to Persian women and did not leave even after the victory of the Islamic Revolution. At least not right away. The signs of the Shah's notorious «Westernism», for which Tehran was nicknamed the «Paris of the East», disappeared gradually: the rich Tehran stalls emptied slowly — apparently, the stocks were not small. Modern glass and concrete buildings and avant-garde multi-level overpasses were covered with «graffiti» of religious appeals written in careless large script.

Tehrani are used to Dutch butter, milk and cheeses, Danish yoghurts, ice cream and cakes, English oatmeal and tea, French cosmetics and perfumes, American jeans and chewing gum, and Japanese appliances. They also didn't seem to realize that it was over. In the winter of '80, on Khyaban-e-Pahlavi (the central and longest street of the Iranian capital, named after the Shah) Studio cassettes with European and American pop music were also freely sold — and no one pointed a finger at those who bought them. They cost pennies, my parents didn't deny me that, and I was very proud of my collection, which included ABBA, Rod Stewart, the Bee Gees, Pink Floyd, and the Rolling Stones. Sometimes the sellers themselves even gave them to me, and this is another memorable sign of Tehran. A child on the shopping streets of the Iranian capital has never been left without a gift: even a sticker, even a piece of chewing gum, but something will definitely be given. At first, my mother tried to forbid me to accept these gifts according to the principle of the Moscow rule «do not take anything from unknown adults.» But soon even she realized that in the East, making offerings to other people's children is an absolutely normal gesture that has no underlying meaning. Iranians are just very fond of children and giving gifts. They do this from the bottom of their hearts and are sincerely offended if their gifts are rejected.

Apart from the «Geupeots» and elegant shop windows, which I had never seen in Moscow, the most from our Tehran life before the Shah's overthrow I remember meeting his wife when I was eight years old. Once I had a chance to observe Shahbanu with my own eyes, and not alone, but with her youngest daughter. She came to our class while the Persian monarchy and the school at the Soviet embassy were still available. For closer communication, the monarch's wife chose us, the second graders, as she brought eight-year-old Leila with her.

According to the memoirs of Shahbanu herself, at that time she was concerned about the introduction of universal secondary education in Iran and was interested in the foreign experience, attending elementary schools at foreign embassies in Tehran. But at the age of 8, of course, we didn't know about it.

We were warned a week in advance that Shahbanu and a real princess of our age would visit us. We were told not to embarrass ourselves in front of the crowned heads and to behave as we were instructed.

Then a man from the embassy came to us and said that we should be courteous, smile and answer all the questions that would be asked of us. But we had to only answer in Russian, even if one of us suddenly could speak English. The embassy's best translator would be sent to us so that Shahbanu and her daughter wouldn't find out what a terrible English pronunciation we had.

I knew what Leila Pahlavi looked like: Dad showed her to me in a Shah's family photo in a pre-revolutionary magazine. The picture was from Leila's birthday party. That's how I found out that she was born the same year as me, only in March.

I was also surprised: only 7 months older than me — and a real princess!

Mom said back then that I was already slacking off like a princess. It would have been better if I had studied more according to Soviet textbooks and dreamed of becoming an educated person instead of an airheaded princess.

But I still wondered how real princes and princesses and their parents, kings and queens, live.

In the picture of the Shah's family, I liked one of Leila's brothers the most, with an open smile, he was much prettier than the boys from our class. From the caption under the photo, I found out

that his name was Ali-Reza and he was 12 and a half years old, older than me by 5 years, just like my dad is older than my mom! Since then, I've always looked in the English-language magazines that Dad brought from the embassy to see if there was anything new about Ali Reza. If I came across his photos, I cut them out and put them in a wooden Khokhloma box that my grandmother sent me for my birthday.

The first beauties of our class, the daughters of the ambassador's advisers, immediately assumed that the princess was terribly conceited, and deliberately agreed not to answer her questions.

«She'll probably wear a crown again!» Julia, the daughter of the ambassador's cultural adviser, snorted. — My mother and I saw a photo of her older sister Farahnaz in a magazine. In the picture, she's still in diapers, and she's already wearing such a crown, bigger than herself! Mom said it cost the budget of a small African country!

«She's supposed to question us according to protocol,» expertly said Lenchka, the daughter of the ambassador's adviser on diplomatic protocol. — And if we keep silent, it will be a failure for her, a diplomatic fiasco! Who's in favor of boycotting this stupid Persian princess?

To be honest, I didn't suffer much when the embassy school closed. At our Moscow English school, at least after I joined it, no one remembered every day who someone's dad was. At the embassy school, day after day, the dads were invisibly with us. All the children were polite and well-mannered, but the attitude towards the offspring, for example, of the ambassador's attaché and the commandant of the embassy was subtly different. Even though we were very small, we felt this difference, and it influenced our attitude towards each other and the world around us.

Everyone agreed to boycott the foreign princess, but when they saw Leila, even the heir to the throne of the ambassador's adviser on protocol relented. She was taller than everyone in our class, even the boys, and she was shy about it, even though she tried to be brave. And the «stupid Persian princess» turned out to be even taller than her, and also much simpler and friendlier!

She came without a crown, in ordinary American jeans, which we all bought in Tehran stores, and behaved as if she did not know that she was a princess.

I remember Leila as thin, lanky, and agile. The princesses of our class found her not very beautiful and therefore not even worthy of a boycott on their part. The princess informed us that she, her older sister Farahnaz and her brother Ali-Reza studied ballet with a Russian teacher named Inga. She was a real choreographer, she and her husband worked under contract at the Tehran Imperial Opera. Madame Inga came directly to their house several times a week and they had great success! But now Madame Inga has gone home, which Leila grieved very much. The princess said that she has been practicing ballet since she was four years old and was not going to give up, so she hoped that she would find a new teacher for herself. But she wanted a choreographer from the Soviet Union! Madame Inga said that Leila had abilities, and the Russian ballet school was the best school!

At that time, I still had no idea that we would move to Bimarestan-e-Shuravi, and miss Tanya would be there, who would practice ballet with me. But I was looking at the little princess, my age, and I decided that I also love ballet and was proud of the Russian ballet school.

Then Leila handed each of us a gift from the Shah's family — a large bright box with the image of a Japanese woman in a colorful kimono. She explained that these were Japanese sets for «sumi-e» — ink drawing on rice paper, her favorite hobby. And she immediately rushed to show us how to use them.

The sets were a real miracle: a huge palette of paints, including the most outlandish colors like «smoked rose», an easel with a stand, 12 brushes of different thicknesses, rolls of delightfully rustling rice paper and stencils for coloring. And everything was so beautiful, glossy, and fragrant that I wanted to start painting immediately, which Leila did. But we held back, as befits happy Soviet children who are not surprised by anything.

While Leila was enthusiastically drawing, Shahbanu explained to our teachers through the «best translator», that sumi-e is an ancient Japanese drawing technique, and it's very useful for

elementary school children. It develops fine motor skills and perseverance, stabilizes the nervous system, promotes the development of taste, a sense of color and harmony. It sounded so convincing that from that moment on, all our parents began to receive sumi-e pictures for all holidays instead of hand-drawn postcards, as was customary before.

Of course: before that, the teacher, in order to protect, as they said then, «her pedagogical reputation in the conditions of a business trip abroad,» had to work with each of us separately, checking our homemade greeting cards to parents. Because if one of us suddenly drew some kind of messy scribble to our attaché dad and signed «CONGRADULASHINS!» under it, and dad turned out to be in a bad mood, the teacher's business trip may have ended there. But here the stencils were ready to use, to color them to your soul's content. And there were even ready-made signatures — «For My Dear Mummy» and «For My Dear Daddy» in English.

Shahbanu herself seemed incredibly beautiful to me. She was wearing a beautiful dress (our teachers later whispered that it was from Valentino), a kind smile and a beautiful lush hairstyle. Shortly before that, she had achieved the abolition of headscarves for women at the state level and herself served as a clear proof of the freedoms achieved. Her head was uncovered. As our embassy said later, it was with this that Shahbanu provoked the most acute wave of popular discontent. In general, she was loved, she helped the sick and the poor a lot, traveled to hospitals herself, and was not afraid to visit villages affected by plague, cholera, and leprosy.

As the embassy instructor had warned, Shahbanu asked about our lives in English, and we answered in Russian. She listened attentively to our answers.: She looked into the eyes of the person answering and nodded in the right place — even before the translator finished the sentence. I've noticed for a long time that not all adults nod in the right place, even if you speak the same language with them. And Shahbanu's interest in us was sincere: I felt it with some organ that was not reflected in the anatomical reference book. And suddenly I felt such trust in this beautiful stranger, as if I had known her all my life.

Farah Khanum was so exquisite, fragrant and shiny, like a big doll. Standing next to her, I thought that I would grow up and definitely become the same.

Shahbanu wasn't wearing any complicated clothes, but how she had a lot of style! Now I know that it's art — anyone with money can dress expensively, but only a person with innate taste can dress in such a way that the source of your special charm stays elusive.

Shahbanu said that besides the youngest daughter, Leila, our age, whom we have already met, she also has an older daughter, Farahnaz, who is seven years older than us, and two sons— Ali-Reza, who is almost 13, and Reza-Cyrus, who is already as much as 18.

She shared that her children don't always study well, but their Shahanshah dad is very worried about poor grades, so they try not to upset him.

At this point, Leila raised her head from her drawing and made a funny face, depicting how «Shahanshah» was unhappy.

It made me laugh, and once again I found myself feeling as if I had already met this cheerful Leila and her elegant mother somewhere. On the day when Shahbanu and her daughter were drawing in our class, we would never have believed that in less than two years, the crowned father of the little princess would suddenly die in exile, and she herself would be found dead in a London hotel room just twenty-three years later, when she and all of us sitting in this class would be 31 years old. And that since her family's flight from Tehran, Leyla will never see her homeland again in her short-lived life.

As a parting gift, Shahbanu and her daughter presented our school with an entire refrigerated truck filled with «family gallons» of English vanilla ice cream and crates of colorful yogurts with different flavors and pieces of fruit inside.

Shah's treats were given to us as school breakfasts for a long time. I loved pineapple yogurt the most.

Many years later, reading Farah Khanum's memoirs, published overseas (a former classmate brought them to me from the USA), that scene popped up in front of my eyes, as if it were yesterday. With what dignity and kindness Shahbanu communicated with us, how sincerely and openly she smiled, and how little Leila painted pictures given by her mother with us...

Whatever the Persian Shah was from a universal and political point of view, judging by how much his family loved him, he was a good husband and father. Shahbanu called her memoirs «Selfless Love» — for her husband, for her homeland, for her children and for everything she did. In them, she writes that she tried to put love into everything she had to do, and therefore she succeeded in many things. Personally, I believe her.

From Farah Khanum's memoirs, I learned the Pahlavi family's assessment of the events of that time, but it happened much later. And then, impressed by the royal visit to our school, I became interested in the Shahbanu, but I only learned what I could overhear in adult conversations.

The embassy wives gossiped that our singer Muslim Magomayev was in love with Shahbanu. And that said a lot: even my mom liked Magomayev. Almost as much as Vakhtang Kikabidze and Renat Ibragimov, from whom she generally went crazy.

It was also said that Farah Khanum had repeatedly shown noble fortitude and restraint. Envious people told Shahbanu all sorts of things about her husband, but she didn't believe anyone — only her beloved and her heart.

Bimarestan and bimarestants

Rumors of an evacuation to the Soviet Union, which spread in the early January days of the 80s, were soon confirmed. Our ambassador issued an official order to the wives and children of the staff to urgently pack up and make an appointment for the next flights, for which the Aeroflot representative office has allocated special quotas. It was announced that the school at the embassy would no longer open after the holidays. Our teachers, the head teacher and the principal also went home.

But my mom absolutely did not want to leave my dad alone in such a dangerous country. At first, they only wanted to send me back to the Union, but they quickly realized that no one was waiting for me at home. At the same time, it became clear who my mother was so categorical about.

My grandmother, my mother's mother, as categorically as my mother refused to leave Tehran, refused to take responsibility for the «heavy burden» in my person. On the phone, she sternly said that it would take a very long time for the «child» — that is, me — to get from her apartment at the University Street to the school №1, which we value so much. But grandma doesn't want to and can't move in with us either, because «she has her own affairs, habits, neighbors, friends, a clinic, a subscription to the conservatory and seven other grandchildren besides me.» Grandma was understandable, and Mom wasn't even offended by her.

My nanny, Aunt Motya, lived with us in Sokolniki. But she was already very old, she could hardly walk, and when we left, she was even afraid to stay alone in the apartment. She had no relatives, only an old friend, Aunt Asya, who lives near Mozhaïsk. Aunt Motya moved in with her during our business trip. She once took me to visit Aunt Asya: she had a spacious house in the village and a large friendly family with children and grandchildren. There was always someone to go to the store, cook, clean, and look after the children and the elderly. We understood that our Aunt Motya would be better off there than alone.

As a result, the family council decided to look for a way to leave both my mother and me in «terrible Tehran», as Dad called it after the title of a famous Persian novel.

The only way wives could avoid being sent to the Soviet Union was by getting a job in one of the Soviet organizations that continue to work in Tehran. And children — only if, at their own risk, their own moms and dads hide them.

Of course, you can't just get a job at the embassy: all the vacancies that were appointed not from Moscow, but through the ambassador, were immediately filled by embassy wives who wanted to earn extra money. And there weren't many such places—a librarian, a bookstore clerk at the embassy club, and a secretary-typist at the embassy school's office. The first two places were occupied, and the school was completely closed.

There were also no vacancies in the trade mission and the State Committee for Economic Relations. There remained organizations like Sovexportfilm, representative offices of Aeroflot, SODA (Soviet Friendship Society) and the Soviet-Iranian bank. When Dad started asking about jobs there, it turned out that their women were also being sent home. There he was also told that the working wives of the Soviet hospital were not being evacuated because there were always not enough hands for the administrative routine conducted in Russian for reporting to the embassy.

As a true daughter of a medical family, my mother enthusiastically clung to this idea, asked my dad to take her to the Soviet hospital, and on the same day she settled into their emergency room, rather than be sent home. But with me, everything was solved even easier: a child at the age of nine will not live alone in a Moscow apartment, it's better not to go to school! That's exactly what my parents decided and kept me with them, under personal responsibility. Before themselves, of course, because the Motherland, represented by our ambassador, did not know about the violation of the order to evacuate children.

They've already had the experience. Shortly before his business trip to Iran, Dad managed to get a summer trip to a sanatorium, which was good for everyone, except that children were not allowed there. However, I had a good rest there with my parents for the entire 24 days. During my morning rounds, my parents hid me in the closet, just like Lillebror hid Karlsson, when Fröcken Bock, the nanny, came into the room. And in case I caught the eye of one of the staff during the day, I was forced to memorize a plausible answer — they say, I spend the night next door in the private sector, and during the day, of course, I resort to mom and dad. To make sure, my parents actually agreed with a woman from the village, to whom I was taken to drink goat milk in the evenings. In the case of a snitch, I could really go to spend the night with her — especially since her daughter Svetka was almost my age and we became friends. Ever since I was five, I've been taking jokes about lovers in the closet very literally, vividly imagining how cramped, stuffy and anxious the poor guys are there.

Thanks to my mother's activity, about a week after the attack on the embassy, the three of us moved from the embassy to Bimarestan-e-Shuravi, the Soviet Red Cross and Red Crescent hospital. The locals called it simply «Bimarestan,» and so did we. And by analogy, Soviet doctors who found themselves in the very heart of the Islamic republic jokingly called themselves «bimarestants.»

At that time, Bimarestan-e-Shuravi had been in existence for more than 30 years, the Tehrani knew it well and trusted the Soviet doctors.

Despite the ideological differences with Shuravi, the Iranians respected Soviet doctors. Our hospital supported itself at the expense of a paid department, where, if necessary, wealthy Iranians who had not left the country could admit themselves. Everyone knew that Soviet doctors had the most accurate diagnosis.

On the territory of the Soviet hospital, as well as in the embassy, the Soviet specialists had their own apartment building. But if the embassy's «housing sector» was located behind a high fence in the «embassy enclave» — the quarter where foreign embassies were concentrated — then the doctors' house stood in the very center of Tehran and was not guarded in any way. Its end faced the wide Karim Khan-Zand Boulevard with a space—like multi-level overpass (it was called «Shahanshakhskaya», since complex road junctions were one of the Shah's main hobbies), and the facade faced a quiet street with an almost Parisian name Villa Avenue. The courtyard of the doctors' apartment building was adjacent to the hospital, which was freely accessible.

But most importantly, what a house it was!

These are now office buildings made of glass and concrete and gray high-rise residential blocks with staircases leading out are considered «faceless», and in the late 70s of the last century they were the height of fashion, like plastics and synthetics.

Our «doctor's» tower, as the locals called it, was a typical representative of the then fashionable «American urban style» and was equipped with advanced earthquake prevention equipment at that time — underground springs. A fan of innovation, when building Tehran, the Shah borrowed the idea of earthquake-resistant «jumping towers» from his American friends. The Americans built such structures in their earthquake-prone areas, in turn, using the technologies of the Japanese, experienced in earthquakes. Even with the smallest tremors that occurred regularly in Tehran, the Doctor's tower began to bounce gently to the beat, which brought me indescribable delight.

Connoisseurs of architecture would have found our house ugly, but in comparison with Moscow's «khrushchevkas» and panel buildings it seemed very modern. Floor-to-ceiling sliding windows and a giant loggia were worth it!

I later met familiar «Tehran» apartment buildings on the outskirts of Manhattan Broadway, in the neighborhoods of London, Barcelona and Rio, built in the industrial 70s. Perhaps it's the open staircases — I find the «native» Tehran buildings in those megacities where there are no harsh winters. Or only there will I recognize it by sight, because for me it has always remained «southern», characteristic of those places where there is a lot of sun.

And then, in the 80s, it seemed to me that I had come to a fantastic city from Dunno on the Moon, where the writer Nosov described the life of lunar capitalists. But I liked everything in our new house — especially the panoramic windows, that were also balcony doors. And the bathroom was the size of the living room in our Moscow apartment and also had a huge window from which Damavand peak looked out at us (the peak of the Elburz Mountain range in the northeast of Tehran, it is also an extinct volcano with a height of 5,671 m, considered the tallest volcano in the entire Middle East).

I was so fascinated by the windows that I almost cried when, a few months after moving to Bimarestan, my mother and I used tailor's scissors to cut rolls of thick black cloth to cover the wonderful view of the north of Tehran and the mountains.

On the first day of the month of Farwardina, or March 21, 1980, together with the Iranians, who count the Solar Hijri, we entered their new 1360th year. And on the last day of the month of Shahrivar (September 22, 1980), the war with Iraq began. From now on, with the onset of dusk, we lowered the blackout curtains, and in conversations among ourselves we quickly got used to labeling the time of events as «before the war» and «at the beginning of the war.» When I said later in Moscow that I had graduated from two grades of school «before the war,» for some reason everyone laughed.

I remember the very first air raid. A siren screamed and Soviet planes appeared in the sky! The whole team of us rushed down to the shelter in horror, like a herd of frightened wild horses. But the scariest thing was that our native aircraft industry was bombing us.

Later, they explained to us that Iraq had bought Soviet fighter-bombers from the USSR as part of some kind of agreement even before it attacked Iran, and now it is using them. And now, although the Soviet Union has officially expressed its disapproval of Iraq for starting a war, it can no longer take away its weapons, as this would be an infringement of the treaty.

Less than a week later, Soviet boys from 5 to 70, instead of rushing headlong into an air raid shelter, first of all curiously lifted their heads into the sky and competed in recognizing patterns, as if they were playing airplanes. Here is the SU-7B flying, and here is the MIG so-and-so...

SU and MIG's relatives bombed us every day, interrupting only on Fridays, when both warring sides had «jumu'ah» — a day off and a holy day, fighting on which, according to Islamic concepts, is a terrible haram (sin). On Fridays, if such an opportunity occurred, Iranians and Iraqis could even sit down at the same table and have a peaceful meal. On other days, Tehran was bombed profusely. The heart-rending wail of a siren was heard almost every evening. The streets immediately resounded with the shrill cries of local boys «Hamush! Hamush!» («Turn out the lights!» — Persian), the electricity went out, so did the elevator, and all the residents of our tower ran down the stairs to the bomb shelter.

And soon everyone was going down to the bomb shelter at a lazy jog, making small talk along the way and exchanging jokes and compliments. With each new time, the fear was dulled, and the evening run to the bomb shelter with a flashlight became something familiar — like an evening exercise. And for us children, it soon became a separate entertainment altogether — on the way to the bomb shelter, we watched and learned about adult life.

My life from 1978 to 1982 was completely different from the usual image of a «happy Soviet childhood.» But I was quite happy and showed a healthy and cheerful curiosity about everything around me.

Now I know for sure that if a child is placed in another world at the age of eight, no matter what it is, they will easily accept on faith everything that happens there. I think this is the most «adaptogenic» period of personality formation. Up to the age of twelve, a child easily finds a home wherever their parents go. Is that why wandering gypsy children are so cheerful, despite the lack of a permanent roof over their heads? After all, they wander, holding on to their mother's skirt.

And I accepted the new reality quickly.

Pendyushka

As soon as my mother became a «bimarestani», having settled in Bimarestan-e-Shuravi (Soviet hospital or SOKK and KP — Soviet Red Cross and Red Crescent Society) for the only position that did not require medical education — the head of the emergency room, Dad and I found something like a nightly comedy program. At dinner, Mom entertained us with stories from the life of the ER. Her responsibility was to log the data of first visitors, as well as those whom the doctors referred to the hospital. The job was not easy. It's not easy to, without knowing either English or Farsi, find out from the visitor their full name, address and what exactly they are complaining about!

Two Iranian translation assistants of Azerbaijani origin, Sarah Khanum and Rosa Khanum, were assigned to my mother. They were fluent in Farsi, Russian, and Turkic, but they could not always help — they also managed the archive, compiled and delivered reports to the Iranian Ministry of Health, and helped with the translation of Soviet doctors who conducted appointments. My mother herself learned German at school and in college and assured me that she still even remembers something. But she couldn't use this knowledge in the emergency room. At that time, shortly after the Islamic Revolution, many Iranians easily communicated in English, but they did not use German. The Russian-Persian phrasebook given to her by her assistants, which Sarah and Rosa made themselves, printed the most popular phrases in Farsi on the left in Russian letters, and their translation on the right. With the help of this homebrew dictionary, Mom was able to successfully fill out the emergency room journal — and at the same time communicate with many different people and explore the world.

Her first working week was marked by a culture shock.:

— These Iranians are so strange! — she shared with Dad in her first working days. — An elderly Persian man comes in today, holds his stomach and explains something to me in his own language. I ask him, «Esme shoma che?» («Tell me your name» — Persian). And he says to me, «Nasralla!» And another one follows him, pokes his finger at his side and mutters: «Nasratullah, Nasratullah...»

— Nothing strange, — my dad, who knows Farsi, explained good-naturedly. — Nasrolla and Nasratollah are one of the most ancient and widespread male names in Iran.

To find out what and where the patient was hurting and put it in the journal, mom fully mastered pantomime and arranged a whole theater of facial expressions and gestures. Using Mom's example, Dad explained to me how important it is to know foreign languages in life. Therefore, my parents, although they didn't give a damn about the 3rd and 4th grades of the Soviet school, still sent me to English courses at the Armenian school on the next street. They were afraid that upon my return to Moscow, they would not take me back to my English special school, which, according to them, was like a theater college. The courses took me an hour twice a week, which was nothing compared to the six-day school schedule of 5-6 lessons per day. However, from the stupor of a Soviet straight-A student who is embarrassed to speak a foreign language (what if a mistake creeps in?!) the Armenian-English courses have successfully saved me. With or without mistakes, I chatted fluently in English without any embarrassment — I conveyed my thoughts to my interlocutors as best I could and somehow understood what they were saying in response.

And I had to talk in English every time I wanted to talk to the girls. The fact is that all the other Soviet girls, except for me, directly evacuated to their homeland, and there were only local girls left — the daughters of the supermarket owner on the corner where our doctors shopped. Everyone knew Romina and Roya well, so they let them play on the territory of the Soviet institution. But unfortunately, this did not happen often, because, unlike me, the girls went to their school every day. The rest of the time I had to communicate with the boys, who, like me, were hidden from the mass evacuation by their parents at their own risk and kept underground in the territory of Bimarestan. There were four of them: three, like me, were skipping school, and one was still not allowed due to his kindergarten age. However, we didn't have a kindergarten either. There was a lot of freedom:

while my parents were working, the five of us — four boys and I — were left to ourselves in the hospital yard, which at that time seemed to me huge and incredibly interesting.

Seryozha, a boy my age, and I were considered the main ones by right of seniority, and the younger ones — first-grader Lyoshka and second-grader Max — obeyed us. Occasionally, only our youngest, five-year-old Sasha, who is also Seryozha's brother, rebelled. The poor guy was always left to his older brother: their mother was an operating nurse for their father, an obstetrician surgeon. Sometimes five-year-old Sasha could get offended by a slap on the back of the head from Sergei and tell his parents. But if Seryozha and I quarreled and fought, and this often happened, Sasha stood up for his brother all the time. Seryozha was generally an ideal for his younger brother, as they would say now — an icon of style. His younger brother repeated both good and bad things after him, such as swear words. And sometimes we didn't express ourselves in the most cultured way, especially when we were fighting.

Given the limited number of children, it is logical to assume that the obscene vocabulary was borrowed by us at home. The most intricate swearing was dragged into our narrow company by Seryozha and Sasha. Their dad was exactly the kind of surgeon I imagined surgeons to be from movies and books—a tall, strong man of few words, with big warm hands. And the adults told me that Seryozha and Sasha's dad was what they call a surgeon from God. It was said that he had no equal, both in the operating room and in terms of a strong word. As for his obstetric specialization, I didn't really understand what it was at the time. For us, all these complicated names of doctoral professions — otolaryngologist, dermatologist, urologist — were familiar, everyday names, but we were not very interested in what exactly they do there during working hours. We only knew exactly the scope of application of those specialists whom the local staff, who had picked up Russian words, called essentially — for example, doctor-skin (dermatologist), doctor-nose and doctor-eye. Lyoshka's dad was just Doctor Nose, Max's dad was a Doctor Eye, and the locals didn't call Seryoga's dad anything.

Seryoga's dad once took him and I to do a caesarean section operation, probably for educational purposes, so that we could see how difficult a mother's life is for her child. We watched everything from the beginning to the end, and I was deeply impressed by the action. Especially when Seryozha's dad extracted a real, living baby from a bleeding wound on the patient's stomach, who was drugged and covered with a sheet, and it whined pitifully. And then Seryoga's dad cut off — as it seemed to me, from the newborn — some kind of bloody object the size of an egg and swiftly threw it into the urn in the corner of the operating room right over our heads. At the same time, I had the pleasure of listening to the vaunted strong «surgical» expressions. I've never heard anything like this before: at home, I've never heard anything scarier than «bastard.» But surprisingly, the strong words did not damage my perception.: I took them as folklore, marveling that ornate derivatives of well-known «bad» words can sound not obscene, but funny.

One evening, over dinner, mom once again amused Dad and me with stories from the life of the emergency room:

— Such a gorgeous lady joined our paid gynecology! — Mom shared. — I didn't even know that there were such beautiful and sophisticated Persian women! Probably from the local aristocracy. And what did she even see in the Red Cross?

— We have the best gynecologists in the city — Dad stood up for the honor of the hospital. — Especially after the British and American ones left.

My mother informed me that the new patient had gone for a checkup on the female side, and she began to describe with gusto her expensive silk robe, gold jewelry, proud posture, delicate features and refined manners. The descriptions were so vivid that I imagined this gorgeous lady in all colors. At the same time, my mother boasted that she had finally managed to apply her German, as the new patient spoke all European languages. Besides, the new lady was very happy to have the opportunity to talk to the first Soviet woman in her life, who turned out to be my mother.

«She told me that she studied architecture in Paris, — Mom told us over another dinner. — In the same „ecole“ (school) as Shahbanu Farah Pahlavi.

For several more nights in a row, my mother described how she had become friends with the gorgeous Persian woman and how much she had learned about her. The name of the beauty, Parizad Khanum— caused a sensation among my male friends, to whom (for lack of other news) I regularly passed on my mother's stories. Against the background of the monotonous bombings, the appearance of khanum «Paris-up-the-ass», as Serega immediately dubbed the new patient, became a real event.

«Such a beautiful woman, and such a... strange name!» — Mom said.

«It's not strange at all, it's an ancient and common Persian female name, translates as „angel“,» Dad explained patiently again, he always had an «A+» in Persian and the history of Iran.

It soon became clear that Parizad Khanum comes from a rich and noble Tehran family. As she told my mother, unlike most of her relatives and friends, her family did not leave Iran at the behest of her father during the revolution. He served under Shah Pahlavi, grieved over the flight of the monarch from his native country, but he could not leave himself — he loved his homeland so much. It didn't seem like empty words at the time: many rich and secular Iranians still hadn't found the strength to leave their homeland after the revolution. Some hoped that the Shah would return and everything would be the same, while others believed that the Islamic revolution would make their people happy.... And love for their native land is not an empty word for Iranians, but a tangible, concrete attachment. I had a chance to see this with the example of my friends: their father, who owned several shops in the center of Tehran, could have followed his relatives who emigrated to Paris and Los Angeles. But he told his wife, two daughters, and son, «We're not going anywhere, our home is here.» And the word of the father in the Iranian family is the law.

Parizad Khanum also told my mother that her family had managed to save one of their luxurious mansions in the foothill town of Darband in northern Tehran from nationalization.

I knew this expensive northern area: sometimes my dad would take my mom and me there by car to take a walk and get some air. It was much cooler in Darband than down in the city center, and the air was much fresher.

Mom said that through her, Parizad Khanum even invited our entire family to visit her house in Darband as soon as she completed the examination.

The new friend shared with my mother what brought her to the Soviet hospital. She said that at the age of 32, she was married for the tenth year, but she still couldn't get pregnant. This is a huge problem for any family, but for an Iranian family it is tenfold. Parizad Khanum knew that infertility is most effectively treated in Europe. But if the Iranians could still leave the country in the 80s, they would definitely not have let them go back — only this stopped Parizad Khanum from receiving treatment in Zurich, where she went during the Shah's time. There are no European doctors left in Tehran, except Soviet ones, and an acquaintance told Parizad Khanum that the Soviets weren't so bad. They said that although the hospital is a Red Cross hospital, the conditions are good, especially in the paid department. The building and equipment were provided by the shah, that is, at the European level. But doctors in the Soviet Union are taught conscientiously and receive high-quality, proven medicines from their homeland.

Finally, the day came when my four friends and I saw the vaunted Parizad Khanum with our own eyes.

We used to skateboard around the hospital yard.: we called them «boards», and then they just appeared on sale. Tehran sports shops managed to buy them in large quantities in the States during the Shah's time, and Khomeini found nothing objectionable in them.

With nothing better to do and good weather, we quickly mastered skateboarding and performed the most unimaginable pirouettes on them. Only five—year-old Sasha didn't have his own «board», although he could skate — his mother just wouldn't let him. When Seryozha was in a good mood and their mom wasn't around, he let Sasha ride. And when Mom wasn't looking, but Seryozha wouldn't

let him ride anyway, the sly Sasha would start to roar deliberately loudly and shrilly. Until the adults came running to his heart-rending howl and started asking, who had hurt such a good boy?

Sasha looked really angelic: white curls and huge blue eyes which he could bat so that he immediately got everything he wanted. The Iranians simply could not calmly pass by our Sasha: they were extremely touched by the blonde and blue-eyed children. Seryoga and I had dark hair, while Lyoshka and Max had brown hair and brown eyes. Besides, we were older, so the locals enthusiastically pinched the chubby cheeks of only the unfortunate Sasha, who hated it. But they explained to him that it was rude to push away Iranian adults who were trying to cuddle him. Iranians do not see anything wrong with kissing someone else's child, and pinching cheeks is for them an expression of admiration of the highest degree. Sometimes I even felt a little offended that no one was hugging me: at nine, I was considered almost an adult among the locals, and the Iranians even added the respectful «khanum» to my address. And little girls aren't treated like that.

And only we, his friends, knew that the angelic Sasha could be different — scream like a banshee, stomp his feet, slam his fists and swear like a sailor.... and maybe his parents knew that too. Although Seryozha and Sasha were both extremely afraid of their father, and threatening to tell their dad brought them both to their senses in an instant.

That morning, as always, we skated around the fountain in the hospital courtyard, and Sasha, as always, whined, begging Seryoga for his board. At that moment, she appeared in front of us — Parizad Khanum. I recognized her immediately, despite the fact that I had never seen her before: by her chiseled profile, a thick brown braid wrapped around her head (women could not wear a headscarf on the hospital grounds), a silk robe with dragons and fine jewelry — as my mother described it all so colorfully. The gorgeous Persian woman was clearly a little bored sitting alone on a bench near the fountain and wanted to chat: She put down the glossy magazine she was flipping through, got up and went—of course, to the angelic Sasha! Moreover, everyone else was running back and forth on their boards, and this cute boy was standing alone and whimpering pitifully.

Of course, the magnificent Parizad first grabbed Sasha by his adorable cheeks and cooed something sweetly in Farsi. Sergei noticed this from afar and quickly realized that the situation was about to get ugly.

— Let's get to them quickly! He shouted at me. — That idiot's going to blurt something out!

It should be noted here that with all of us, parents carried out regular preventive work on the rules of communication with locals.

In principle, it was impossible to forbid us to approach foreigners: we simply did not have any other place for walking, except where patients and their visitors go out for fresh air. But we knew that you can't ask or take anything from foreigners (except when you're in a store with adults and the owner gives you something, and your parents let you take it).

If the foreigners themselves ask you for something or ask for it, you should immediately inform your elders about it.

We also couldn't describe ourselves as Russian, only Soviet.

Our parents told us that we should never be rude, snap back, or in any way discredit the proud title of a Soviet child. Otherwise, they said, patients could complain about this to the «Rais» — that is, the director of the hospital («rais» means «chief» in Persian). And our parents would be sent to the Union in 24 hours for not educating their children properly. This was what we were most afraid of: it was scary to even imagine what the moms and dads would do to us if their Volga cars, cottages and other grandiose plans for a well-fed life and a full house in the Union were disrupted because of our behavior.

The curricular about «requests and questioning» was not very relevant: in any case, the foreigners around us did not know Russian, and we did not know Farsi or English. Of the five of us, I was the only one who spoke a little English, thanks to the schools, both Sokolniki and Tehran Armenian. When I started attending school at St. Sarkis Armenian Cathedral, and my dad was paying

for it, he even told me to take every opportunity to practice my conversational skills. For example, if one of the hospital patients suddenly wants to talk to me in English during a walk, I should not run away like a savage or be impolite and quiet as a mouse. It is quite possible to tell them your name and age, tell them what a beautiful city Moscow is and how wonderful it is that Soviet doctors treat Iranian patients.

— Just don't accidentally say monkey or dog to anyone, because for Iranians these are offensive name-calling, — my dad joked. — They will immediately run to the rais to complain!

Apparently, Seryoga was afraid of rais's «complaints» when he saw that his younger brother, extremely upset by the lack of a skateboard, was left alone with a foreign woman who was squeezing him. Five-year-old Sasha, although he did not speak foreign languages due to his young age, could speak Russian beautifully, like an adult, when he wanted to. But in this case, Sasha did not want to communicate, he wanted to ride. And the foreign lady, clutching his cheeks, was in his way. Sasha wanted only one thing — to take the board away from his brother, and he apparently had a plan. And exactly at the moment when Seryoga and I rolled up to Parizad Khanum, who was holding Sasha's rosy cheeks in her manicured fingers, the cunning Sasha tried to kick the board out from under his older brother, for which he had to push Parizad Khanum away rather sharply. At the same time, he loudly and articulately uttered a gem from the folklore repertoire of his dad, the surgeon — in the printed version, let it sound like «pendyushka.»

Supplemented with a diminutive suffix, the swear word sounded funny and surprisingly accurately reflected the essence of what it was applied to. At least, in the performance of Seryozha and Sasha's dad. He called annoying women «pendyushka», and at the same time, annoying circumstances that complicate life. For example, a harsh one: «This pendyushka has exhausted me!» would be about a pesky patient. And the contemptuous «It's all pendyushka's tears» would be about making a mountain out of a molehill.

Detaching the annoying Parizad Khanum from his cheeks, little Sasha chose the first tone, harsh:

- Go away, pendyushka! — the angelic boy spelled out clearly in the deathly silence formed by the fact that the surprised Parizad Khanum stopped chirping.

Perhaps something like «Excuse me!» could have been said in a similar tone, for example, when you push away someone who is blocking your exit from the tram at your stop, and you're running late.

— What did this pretty kid say? — Parizad Khanum asked in English, looking at me for some reason. She probably thought I was an adult too.

Seryoga poked me painfully in the side, implying that the situation needed to be saved. I understood him. And I myself was polite enough to guess that the true meaning of what was said by the «pretty kid» should not be translated to a foreigner.

— He said that you're very beautiful! — I got off with a simple phrase.

Then Parizad Khanum's face broke into a satisfied smile and, to our horror, began to wail joyfully in all sorts of ways:

— Oh, pendyushka! I am pendyushka! What a nice Russian word! Such a polite Soviet boy!

The boys giggled into their fists and ran away. And for the sake of decency, I stood for another half minute, then respectfully, like a good girl, said «Bye bye!» and also ran off to my friends to giggle.

The next day, we tried not to catch the eyes of Parizad Khanum, hoping that without seeing us, she would forget the «beautiful Russian word» that she had learned so inappropriately. And after a couple of days, we completely forgot that we had taught Parizad Khanum bad things.

But on the third day in the evening, mom came home from work shocked and began to share with dad.:

— Can you imagine, this intelligent Persian woman, Parizad Khanum, comes to my emergency room today to treat me to some peaches and suddenly declares: «You, Irina Khanum, are a

pendushka!» Don't tell me that this is just another ancient common Persian name! — Mom raised her voice warningly and continued:

— I'm already speechless! And she keeps repeating it, looking into my eyes and asking: «Do you like it, Irina-Khanum?»

I sensed something was wrong and began to move towards the front door to escape into the courtyard. But Dad anticipated my maneuver.

• Stop right there! It seems to me that you were involved in this!

— And you can't even tell her that it's bad! — Mom continued the story, deliberately not looking at me. — Well, I asked her: «Where did you, Parizad Khanum, hear such a word?!» And she said to me: «There is a charming and well-mannered blond boy walking in our yard, he told me so! And the older dark-haired girl translated what it means in Russian — beautiful! Such a little boy, and already compliments the ladies! It's so lovely! So I remembered the word, so that on occasion I could also compliment one of the Soviet women. And you, Irina-khanum, are the most important pendushka!»

Then Dad roared with laughter. But Mom wasn't amused:

— That's how you educate her, with your jokes, and I get the results! Stop it! — she yelled — I would have liked to see your face if this Parizad had come into *your* office with the message that you were the biggest jerk!

Then they started lecturing me. But they quickly came to the conclusion that I wanted the best. In any case, I had no other choice. As for little Sasha, it's not his fault — he got it from his older brother, who, in turn, got it from his father. And I could even guess where! Seryozha could have «sourced» the word «pendyushka» from the very operation where his father took us: in the process, this word has been uttered and I even remembered it. Another thing is that I'm not five anymore since long ago, and I would never apply it to an adult, especially to a foreigner.

As a result, my parents decided that if Sasha was scolded now, then, on the contrary, he would remember this obscene word for a long time. And if you pretend that nothing terrible has happened, then maybe he will forget. And Sasha's parents don't need to be upset — they've had a number of important surgeries the other day. And our «Paris-up-the-ass» will be discharged soon anyway — and then, let her call everyone pendyushka! In the meantime, while she hasn't checked out, I just need to warn all our people so that, if anything, they don't react to «compliments» from Parizad Khanum.

And so it turned out. Parizad Khanum called all the nurses in gynecology names for another week, and then she was discharged. They say that after treatment in a Soviet hospital, she managed to get pregnant — and Sasha's father played an important role in this; he had to cut something out from her.

Darband cable car

Darband, like the other northern district of the city of Shemiran, is located almost 2,000 meters above sea level. And the funicular from Darband lifted to Mount Tochal as much as 4,000 meters. I remember this information clearly because I couldn't visualize it at the age of 9. Here we are with mom and dad walking along Darband, and below us, two kilometers below, the sea! And where is it then? Later, of course, I had to realize that for such a geographical statement, the sea does not necessarily have to be nearby. And it just means that we are in the mountains, and the sea, above which we are located, can be anywhere.

Nearby was the main one of the shah's residences, the Niavaran Palace. It was there that the Pahlavi family spent most of their time before their flight. There have been many fine restaurants in the vicinity since the shah's time: they were still working, they just stopped selling wine.

In Darband, what I liked most was admiring the luxurious villas surrounded by magnificent gardens with waterfalls and fountains, surrounded by mulberry hedges instead of fences. There was also a mansion of the Iranians' favorite national singer, Googoosh, but at that time she had already fled the country.

One of the houses was built in the shape of a giant ship, and Dad told me that the owner of this villa was a former captain. And with such architecture of the house, he supposedly tried to drown out his longing for the seas and oceans. And that since he came ashore, every morning he goes to the «bow» of his house-ship, stands at the helm, which he installed there, and begins to give orders to the crew of his ship — that is, the household. I had no idea how Dad knew all this, but a house-ship with a master-captain who had brought home a real steering wheel from a real ship, became doubly interesting in my eyes.

I also loved going up to the observation deck of Darband, from where the city was in full view and seemed like a toy. But my main passion for a while was the cable car. Until that very time, when Dad caved in to my whining and bought me a round-trip ticket to the nearest station for one toman. It was still oh so far from the top of the Tochal from there, but that was enough for me.

Now this device would be called a first-generation chairlift: in the 70s, under the shah, it lifted up skiers, but in the 80s it remained out of business. My mother believed that Iranians couldn't have anything working properly, so I was strictly forbidden to ride on what seemed to her to be an abandoned «cable car.»

It was forbidden, and therefore it became the sweetest fruit that I regularly remembered every time we came to Darband.

And one day, when mom didn't come with us, and I was nagging dad, he said what I was actually trying to get from him: «Okay, just leave me alone!» And bought one ticket, saying that his «Parizad» probably wouldn't fit in a narrow seat.

I was seated in the coveted seat, and I was completely alone on the entire cable car, there were no other passengers in principle. Dad stayed waiting for me near the control room, from where the device was operated by an elderly Iranian.

It was a magical feeling, sitting alone in a tiny chair, flying first over Darband mansions and gardens, then over restaurants in mountain gorges, over a waterfall and a mountain river, bravely watching how houses and people below turned into small bugs before my eyes. And suddenly the creaking of ropes and gears stopped, my seat jerked and froze — and I hovered over an almost bottomless abyss. At first it was scary, funny, and breathtaking. But a second later, I was gripped by icy horror and a feeling of utter helplessness and loneliness — I still remember this nasty feeling. I suspect that the man who ran the cable car turned off the switch at the highest point for a couple of

seconds at my father's request, since they chatted while I was riding. If that's the case, then my father's trick was a success: since then, when I came to Darband, I have never mentioned the cable car again.

Pul farda!

I loved it when the daughters of the owner of the neighboring grocery store, an Iranian named Rukhi, came to play in our hospital yard. We spoke a hellish mix of English, Russian, and Farsi, but we understood each other perfectly in a strange way. And having picked up everyday Persian words, I again stumbled into a linguistic incident. Or rather, I disguised a deliberate crime as one, and I've already been punished for it. My parents rarely indulged me with sweets, but I loved them very much — especially caramel cornflakes. They were sold in large, beautiful boxes in the store of my friends' father and cost quite a lot — 15 tomans. At some point, the thirst for enjoying taste became stronger in me than common sense, and I figured out how to arrange this pleasure for myself. I've already noticed that on certain days and hours, my friends' father leaves his 15-year-old son Hamid behind the counter while he goes shopping. Hamid was a very polite guy, or he just liked me, but he smiled all the time when he saw me. And when I first showed up at his store without my parents and pointed at the treasured box, Hamid gladly handed it to me. And even though instead of paying, I said «Pul farda!» («Money tomorrow!» — Persian), the kind guy also nodded happily and smiled.

That was actually my plan. Initially, I expected to eventually confess to my dad and ask him to give Hamid 15 tomans. But then I somehow forgot... especially since everything was going so well, and the young salesman was still smiling happily at me every time! Every time, because I began to visit regularly for treats. And not only myself: I brought my boy friends and with the help of my magic phrase «Pul farda!» I treated them to any goodies. Of course, my girl friends had plenty of sweets anyway, because it was their store! And the boys, although they could be nasty, just like me, they were not spoiled with treats. For almost a month, the owner's son meekly gave me everything I asked of him. But one day the hour of reckoning finally came: apparently, so much «fard» had accumulated that Mr. Rukhi himself noticed the shortage — and Hamid had to «turn me in.» I don't know how exactly everything turned out there, but I remember the scandal at home very well! On that fateful evening, my dad had just stopped by Rukhi's shop, where the friendly owner usually chatted with him in a friendly way — as with the only one who could communicate in his native language in a Soviet hospital. But this time, Mr. Rukhi looked confused and upset: after a word of apology, he presented my father with a bill that had already exceeded a hundred tomans. And that evening, instead of dinner, my parents gave me a debriefing, which they were very successful at. Perhaps it was because of this that I had never been involved in any scam in my life since that very distant Tehrani 80s.

My first sheep

On the eve of Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, the week-long celebration of which begins on the day of the vernal equinox on March 20, Dad informed me that the Rukhi's family was inviting me to spend the night. From Tuesday evening, Chaharshanbe Suri will be celebrated in their house — the last night from Tuesday to Wednesday of the outgoing year, on which it is customary to perform interesting rituals, this tradition was inherited by Iranians from the Zoroastrians.

Mom tried to resist: a child, alone, all night, to a local house, for religious celebrations, but Dad assured her that Chaharshanbe Suri, like Nowruz itself, came from pre-Islamic times and had nothing to do with religion. Rather, it is a folklore heritage like carols and Yuletide fortune-telling in Russia.

But the main argument for mom was that since the child — that is, I — was deprived of Soviet children's educational activities, then at least let them look at the Iranian ones, and at the same time practice in English and gain knowledge about ancient history and the philosopher Zarathustra. My mother couldn't resist the concepts of «educational activities» and «knowledge,» and I was safely released.

At the appointed hour — by 9 p.m. on Tuesday — Dad escorted me to the door of Rukhi's house, promising that he would pick me up tomorrow evening.

The whole family gathered in the apartment, which occupied an entire floor — Mr. Rukhi and his wife, my friends Romina and Roya, their older brother Hamid, and a neighbor's girl named Janet came in and brought her cousin with her. While waiting for a festive dinner, the girls and I sat on the roof of their house, which was universally accepted in Tehran before the war, and enjoyed a warm, calm evening, telling scary stories in a circle. When it was my turn, I also gave out another «horror story», although the task was complicated by the fact that I had to «tell a story» in English, otherwise others would simply not understand me. Gesturing actively, I invented a literary translation of children's idioms like «longest of long arms» sticking out of the wall of the «darkest of dark rooms.»

Meanwhile, Mr. Rukhi, his wife, Hamid, Roya, and two other strangers with a large bag came up to the roof. The bag was moving and making noises.

— Let's go look faster! My friends shouted. «They brought the sheep!»

A small curly-haired lamb was indeed pulled out of the bag. He was bleating monotonously in the arms of one of the men and did not even try to escape. The lamb was given a piece of sugar and he began to munch it with pleasure.

«Will they kill him?» I pointed at the men in horror.

Before that, I had only seen sheep so closely in a field around the very holiday home near Moscow, where the usher let the kids go to the cinema without tickets.

— No, our father and Hamid will kill him themselves! — Romina replied proudly. — But don't worry, the lamb won't understand that it will be killed. See, they gave him sugar? So that he would taste sweets and die in joy.

— How can you die in joy? — I was amazed.

«It's very simple, — the Iranian girl replied calmly. — If you don't know you're going to die and your mouth feels sweet. — He won't see the knife, because they'll put a bag over his head so that the meat is halal.

— Halal is the meat of an animal that has not been affected by stress hormones from fear of death, — Hajji explained after overhearing our conversation. — For this, the animal must not know that it is being prepared for slaughter. There should also be no blood left in the carcass so that it becomes pure food for the faithful.

— The carcass will be hung up so that all the blood will flow out of it, — Romina added.

I shuddered. Not so much out of pity for the ram, but from the matter-of-factness with which she said it. If we had heard this at the Yunnatov station in Sokolniki Park, where we were taken to Moscow school, Romina would definitely have been expelled from the pioneers. But she was clearly not in danger of that in Tehran.

I realized from my friend's tone that this was probably an honorable case, and it was inappropriate to express my horror at the imminent death of the ram.

The only thing that bothered me was that everyone was clearly going to witness the procedure of his death, and I didn't want that. I knew that I couldn't save the lamb with this, I was just afraid to spoil the mood. And it was wonderful for me at the end of a long and eventful day.

When I saw the lamb, I was reminded of Alyosha the goat from Dad's stories about his Turkmen childhood. Dad told me how in his hometown, on the edge of the desert, he went far away with Alyosha so that the goat could graze something other than camel thorns. Dad loved this goat very much and cried a lot when Alyosha disappeared one day. His dad, my grandfather, told him that his beloved goat had run away. And his mother, my grandmother, while clearing the dishes after a hearty meat dinner, suddenly said: «Thank Allah and Alyosha the goat that we are full today!». That's how Dad found out that he, along with his siblings, had eaten his beloved pet, which he walked and played with. He cried terribly, and his mother shamed him: «War, hunger, men are fighting, and a woman's duty is to feed her family, son!» It was during the Great Patriotic War, when Dad was five years old.

I was very impressed that Dad unknowingly had dinner made with his pet. And I realized that I would not be able to calmly watch a lamb being killed for the same purpose!

But at the same time, I realized that it would be indecent to defiantly refuse to be present at the ram execution. Judging by the reaction of my friends, for Iranians and even for their children, this is not only a familial thing, but also a festive one. By specially slaughtering a sheep, the Iranian hosts give a special honor to their guest. And in this case, the guest is me.

I didn't want to offend these nice, hospitable Rukhi, who started this main ritual of national hospitality for me. Watching as a clean canvas bag was put on the lamb's head, I was preparing to bail out and whisper to Romina that I needed to go to the toilet, for which I would have to go downstairs to the apartment, when suddenly everyone clapped their hands and shouted: «Mashalla!»

Hamid was hosing off the concrete area in the corner of the roof, near the rain drain And Mr. Rukhi was holding the lamb by its hind legs. He didn't bleat anymore.

«What, already?»?? I was scared. «I didn't even hear anything!»

— What did you want to hear? — Janet laughed. — Bloodthirsty screams, sounds of a chase and the screeching of a chainsaw?!

The carcass was hung by its hind legs, and I still ran to the toilet.

When I returned, I was in for a short lecture from Mr. Rukhi. Apparently, he was worried that grieving the lamb could ruin my holiday.

— You see, it's not by chance that the faithful prefer mutton,— he said. — Unlike other animals, a ram does not understand when it is being led to the slaughter. Before it dies, they feed it sugar and cover its eyes with a bag so that it does not see the knife and does not get nervous. It does not experience fear, so the hormones of anxiety and fear, cortisol and adrenaline, which are very harmful to humans if they enter their body with eaten meat, are not released into its blood. Before butchering the lamb, all the blood is completely drained from the carcass — these are the «halal» rules recommended by the Almighty. Consuming meat from a frightened animal or an omnivore like a pig, as well as meat with blood — is a sin for a believer. It seems to be a religious dogma, but it is medically justified. The lamb feeds on grass, is not poisoned by the hormone of fear, and is purified from blood, which may contain various elements that are not useful to people. Mutton is the cleanest and healthiest meat. Next comes the chicken.

— And mutton fat is best absorbed and does not make you fat! — Roya added an argument to themini-lecture.

Surprisingly, either because I didn't see any blood, or the ancient local tradition of honoring a dear guest with a steamed lamb absorbed the atmosphere of the holiday so well that it lost the taste of disgust and fear of death, but I somehow immediately calmed down and accepted the situation.

Or maybe half of the Eastern blood told me that in this place and with these people, it would not be considerate or wise to show pity for the lamb, judge their cruelty and refuse dinner. After all, I'm basically a random person here, and Oriental people have been slaughtering sheep for centuries, with or without me. And Alyosha the goat was eaten too. On the one hand, I felt sorry for it, but on the other, it was used to feed the hungry children of war, who at least sometimes needed to eat meat so that they could grow and develop.

Thinking this way, I quickly, as they would say now, closed my own «gestalt with the lamb» and smelled the aroma with gusto when they began to roast it.

The lamb was roasted right there on the roof, on a spit above a massive built-in barbecue. I've never seen such people in the Soviet Union. Even in the kebab shops of Sokolniki Park, skewers were placed on ordinary four-legged barbecues, not to mention family country kebabs on tiny homemade barbecues.

Mr. Rukhi's horse

The next morning, Roya woke us up at seven and said that it was okay, we would sleep well during the New Year holidays.

I was really sleepy, and I almost said that I didn't have any New Year holidays on Novruz! But then I remembered that I don't even have school!

The table was already set for breakfast: omelette with sabzi, toasts with my favorite processed paneer homei cheese, which looks like very thick cream, and tea with fresh shirini, already brought by Hamid from the Armenian bakery.

At the table, Maryam Khanum shook her head and softly explained something to Romina in Farsi. In response, Romina just smiled and spread her hands, saying, well, what can you do now?! I guessed that her mom was scolding her for the jug.

And I thought again, how glorious these Rukhi are! If I had deliberately broken a jug at home, my mom would have cussed me out much louder. And I could hardly smile carelessly like Romina, listening to what she thinks of me.

Hajji Rukhi announced that we have big plans for today. First we're going to the country club to ride horses.

«Do you ride?» Hamid asked me.

To me, it sounded like a movie about the life of aristocrats: «By the way, do you play tennis?»

My acquaintance with horses at that time came down to the fact that one day, walking with me through Sokolniki Park, Dad took me to the territory of the sports society «Urozhai», where we had a little look at the riders engaged in the arena. I remember the pungent horse smell, the crack of the whip and the strictness of the coach, which I already associated with any «big» sport. If the coach doesn't shout or swear, it means that these are not serious classes, but just a health group. Everything was serious at the Urozhai. At least because Dad and I were soon kicked out, saying that outsiders were not allowed to practice. And if we wanted to ride ourselves, then on Sundays in the morning there were rental groups for «dummies».

Remembering all this, I simply shook my head at Hamid's question.

— Our horses are entirely to Hamid's credit! Hajji said. — He visits them and walks them. Thanks to him, they are well-groomed beauties.

Hamid straightened out noticeably at his father's words. Taking care of the horses was clearly his pride. He probably goes to the riding section. At the Urozhai, Dad and I were also told that, in addition to riding directly, every rider should be able to take care of a horse — clean, saddle, feed. However, I didn't understand what had Hajji Rukhi to do with it and why did he say «ours» about horses? I was so curious, I even tensed up and remembered how it would be in English to «ride.»

— Ah, does he clean them, feed them, and saddle them? — I guessed.

— Yes, he knows how to do it all, — Mr. Rukhi admitted, not without pride. — But, of course, every day a groom, a saddler and a trainer do it, because Hamid studies and helps me in the store.

Hamid straightened up again.

— But my son visits our pets every week, — the father of the family continued, — checks if everything is fine and takes each one for a long walk in the fields so that they can run in the wild. Spends all weekends there! — Hajji added, looking at his son with approval.

Maryam Khanum also nodded her head in admiration of her son. Hamid was beaming.

— Since our daddy made this purchase, — Roya interjected, not without malice, — the whole family has responsibilities for it, not just Hamid! — Romina and I go to walk them too! And I also clean them!

— You've cleaned it only twice! — Hamid precised.

Romina, who had been the ringleader the day before, became quiet in the morning. She probably didn't get enough sleep. At breakfast, she did not hesitate to nod off. Usually glib of tongue, she only turned on Hamid's «two times» here. She opened one eye and said:

— That's not true! Roya and I spent the whole last vacation there! And we almost always go with Hamid!

— Everyone is doing well here — their father said soothingly, — everyone helps their parents with the horses.

Maryam Khanum nodded approvingly again.

And I was completely stumped. What kind of horses are these that they «need to help their parents with»?!

I decided not to be shy and ask the question directly. And then we were going to see these horses, what if I also have to «help» with them? But I couldn't, and I needed to warn them about it! Maybe after that, the kids won't want to take me with them. Although I really wanted to go to the horses, I was an honest girl, so I was sad:

— I can't clean, saddle, or feed! Are you not going to take me with you?

Everyone laughed. And even Maryam Khanum, even before my words were translated to her. I noticed that Maryam Khanum, although she did not speak English herself, understood almost everything without translation. Either she knows the language after all, just doesn't want to speak, or it's not the language at all, but her natural sensitivity and sincere interest in her children's conversations with me. I also found myself sometimes understanding what was being said in Farsi, even though I didn't know the language.

Laughing, Hajji Rukhi said that I didn't have to worry, I would be taught everything.

Romina opened her eyes again, apparently trying to calm me down:

— You're scaring my friend now! Dad bought six horses two years ago, — she explained to me. — They are stabled in Dushanbe, where we are going now. Our daddy pays for their full service, so no one really owes anything. We just like to ride, and at the same time we've all learned how to take care of them ourselves. It's interesting! And it's beautiful in Dushanbe!

— Shah Naser Al-din loved to hunt there! — Hajji Rukhi confirmed.

— Is this the one with 84 wives in tutus? — I asked, remembering Dad's stories.

Everyone laughed again and admitted that yes, this was the shah, he loved everything beautiful, and especially women and horses.

While we were finishing our tea, Roya and Romina packed their bags. I helped them put them in the trunk of the big family Mazda. The Rukhi family had two cars, both parked in the garage under the house. The Mazda van, as Romina explained to me, is used for country walks, and they will soon take the whole family to the Caspian Sea. The rest of the time, Hamid drives it on his father's business assignments. Hajji Rukhi drives an elegant long Dodge on business, and when Roya and Romina were studying far from home, Maryam Khanum drove them to school in it.

All this was amazing to me: horses that can be «bought», and cars that can be driven by 15-year-old boys and mothers. In my homeland, I saw only one woman who drove a Lada. She was my mother's childhood friend from Baku, who worked in Moscow. But this aunt Lala was an unusual person in everything else: she worked as a surgeon and wrote scientific papers. My mom used to say that Lalochka was so smart that sometimes it even got scary. None of my friends had a mom who drove a car, not even Katya's gorgeous aunt Nina, an actress. And I'm not talking about 15-year-old boys at all — the rights in the Union were granted only from the age of 18.

I found myself in a completely different life, but the values in it were familiar to me. And not at all like the mores of the «moon capitalists», which were described in «Dunno on the Moon» by the children's writer Nosov.

It said that in the world of capitalism, where you can buy and sell anything — even a house, even a horse — everyone becomes greedy, cunning and inhuman. The Rukhis had a beautiful house, two cars, several shops, and, as it turned out, six horses, but they seemed loving, kind, and caring to me.

Hajji Rukhi drove the car to the entrance. Hamid sat next to him, and Maryam Khanum came out to see us off. As I was told, she stays at home «waiting for the sheep.» I didn't really understand which sheep and why, but after the embarrassment with the horses, I was too shy to ask again. Who knows, maybe Mr. Rukhi was buying sheep too.

There were five of us again. Janet, according to Romina, was forced by her parents to prepare for retaking the math test. But she promised to come by our return, without her brother, but with a friend.

— We'll have big things to do tonight! — Romina promised mysteriously, handing me a pillow. — In the meantime, you can take a nap!

With these words, she curled up comfortably in the third and last seat of their huge car and instantly fell asleep. Roya and I also sat comfortably in the middle seat, since the thrifty Romina had brought pillows for everyone.

I must have fallen asleep too. Because when I opened my eyes, we were already on a picturesque hill covered with a bright green meadow. Laughing, Romina informed me that I had overslept the Dusan Tappe airbase, which she wanted to show me, and we were already at the place, the name of which translates as «Rabbit Hill».

It turned out that we had been driving for several hours — and all that time I had peacefully slept through!

To the right, a single blue peak rose above the broken line of mountains, propping up the clouds. I stared at it, squinting my eyes in the bright morning sun.

Romina handed me a pair of sunglasses, and Hajji Rukhi explained, pointing to the mountain: «This is our beautiful Damavand!»

There were low wooden buildings scattered here and there on the hill. Now I would call them «Alpine-style chalets,» but I didn't know such words then. We left the car in the parking lot, where there were several other cars.

Families with children were walking on the lawn. Children were running, playing ball and badminton, tennis courts and an indoor swimming pool in an all-glass cube building were visible to the side.

— Tehranis come here for the New Year holidays, — Roya said. — They live in these wooden houses. It's nice here, you can walk, breathe the air, ride, swim...

— There is a sauna, — added Romina, — it's good for the skin. And over there is our stable! — my friend pointed to a wooden building nearby.

I really liked everything around me; I thought to myself that this Shah Naser Al-din really knew what was good for him.

We went to the stable. Everyone we met on the way happily greeted Mr. Rukhi and all of us, and made sure to stop for a little friendly conversation. And since we met someone at every turn, it took us a long time to get to the stable, even though it was two steps away.

The stable was very clean, and there was that pungent horse smell familiar from the Urozhai club. On the stall of each horse there was a plaque with its name, date of birth and breed in Russian and English.

Mesmerized, I peered into the stalls and studied the signs. Colorful horses poked their muzzles through the watering holes, and my companions stroked their wet noses. At first, I was afraid to touch them with my hands, but the prudent Romina gave me a bag with sugar cubes and small carrots:

— First treat, then pets!

Time stopped and froze, because I decided to treat every horse that stuck its muzzle out to me with big purple eyes that seemed sad to me.

Maybe I didn't remember the Urozhai horses very well, but it seemed to me that the horses here were much bigger. Tall, long-legged, graceful steeds, nervously flaring their sensitive nostrils and from time to time proudly tossing their heads, waving their thick mane. I suddenly remembered the Akhal-teke woman that Ryodkin had «called» me.

– Are there any Akhal-teke here? — I asked Hamid, since he was considered the main horse enthusiast in the Ruhi family.

– Dad, — Hamid turned to his father instead of answering, — Jamila Khanum knows the Akhal-Teke breed!

– You know a lot about horses! — Roya exclaimed.

Of course, I really wanted to nod my head. But I had to admit that my dad was just telling me. I already guessed that I would be offered a ride. But I've never been closer to horses in my life than I am today. And the only horse I had ridden before was the gray-brown-crimson one that my parents had made overnight from a mop.

– Oh, good taste! Hajji Rukhi was delighted. — We just have one Akhal-teke, the most expensive in my collection. Her name is Arezu, which means «desire.» We named her that because she's wayward, like any beautiful woman. Arezu can run faster than anyone and jump higher than everyone. But if she doesn't want to, no whip can make her! A real Akhal-teke, proud and stubborn! That's what we'll put you on, since it's your favorite breed!

Apparently, horror was reflected in my eyes, because Hamid immediately added:

– Everything that the father said about Arezu does not apply to children. She loves children very much. And like any creature that knows its own worth, it will never offend someone who is smaller and weaker.

For some reason, I immediately calmed down.

The only thing that bothered me a little was that I would look like a «sack of shit» on a horse (I heard this expression on Urozhai, the trainer applied it to one of the riders). Meanwhile, Hamid brought out two horses for himself and his father, and Roya and Romina brought out a horse for themselves. Each of them patted their pet on the scruff of the neck, called it by name and talked to it as if it were a human being.

Roya explained that each member of their family has their own «sponsored» horse, which the owner visits and walks so that the pet does not forget it. Because a trainer and a groom, of course, make life easier for a horse owner, but an animal must know its owner, understand when they are in the saddle, and not one of the attendants. Even Maryam Khanum had her own black horse named Arash, which means «truth» in Farsi.

While Hamid was holding the reins of a white and red horse, Mr. Rukhi personally went to get Areza for me, and Roya and Romina promptly jumped into the saddles and rode up to me to introduce me to their mentors. The girls had helmets on their heads and whips in their hands. I felt like I was in a movie, it all looked so beautiful and unusual.

– Meet my beloved man, Anglo-trakehner Shah! — Romina declared, sitting on a tall bay horse and kissing his neck. — He's very kind, isn't he, my Shahanshah? — Just in case, don't come up from behind. Stallions don't like it, they can kick.

I completely walked away from this kicking Shah, even though he was really very handsome.

– Well, the Shah and I won't wait for you, — Romina said, — because you're too slow! Come on, honey! — She kicked the horse lightly with her heels to the side and he, bypassing the step, rushed forward, towards the bright green meadow, which seemed endless.

– Don't drive His Majesty to exhaustion, — Hamid called after her. — Walk along the flood-meadow later.

I don't know if Romina heard him, she sped off into the distance so quickly.

Meanwhile, Roya introduced her dappled gray filly to me.:

– Her name is Shahnaz, which translates as «the Shah's pride». My father says that she is your compatriot, the Orel trotter. They say they are bred in Iran after your Russian tsar presented several heads to Nasruddin Shah.

«My compatriot» was shorter than Romina's Shah and stockier, with beautiful long bangs falling over her eyes, just like mine. But her look from under her bangs didn't seem too kind to me.

Roya ran off after Romina, and Hajji Rukhi called me. He was standing near the stable and waving at me.

– Go to the jockey room, — Hamid explained to me, «they'll give you something to change into and a stack.

At that time, I still did not know what a «jockey-room» and «stack» were, but I guessed it when I came at the call of Mr. Rukhi. He took me to the stable room: there were saddles and other accessories hanging on hooks, and for me they had prepared a helmet, a whip, thick breeches and high leather boots with flat soles.

– It's all Romina's, — Mr. Rukhi said carefully, — it should fit the size. — If the boots are suddenly too big, shout to me, I'll bring socks. I'm right next door, — he said, and left me in the jockey room.

I inhaled the tart scent of leather, horses, and hay, mixing in the air with the clear mountain breeze that blew through the window—and this simple and complex fragrance has forever remained for me the smell of freedom.

I knew for sure that if, for example, my mother or a strict coach from the riding group were here, they might have allowed me to sit in the saddle, but with their comments, remarks and warnings they would have definitely spoiled the beauty of the moment. And the Rukhi seemed to think I was an adult. They trusted me, even though I confessed that I had never been in a saddle. They didn't even doubt that I could do it, and it gave me strength, enthusiasm, and confidence that I could really do anything if I wanted to.

Probably because of me experiencing that early feeling, riding invariably gives me back a sense of freedom and conscious choice.

All of Romina's jockey gear suited me. While I was pulling on my breeches and boots, I saw a label with the Hermes brand on it. The same thing was found on the helmet. My mother had perfumes from this company, and she often repeated that they were very expensive and for ladies, so that I would not try to put on perfume. But the fact that Hermes also produces riding equipment was a surprise to me. That was the first thing I told Dad when I got home. And Mom suggested that maybe it was another Hermes, not the ones with the perfume. But Dad said it was the one, it also produced jockey gear, only in small batches, for their regular customers.

– It's an expensive treat, — Dad added thoughtfully. — But since the Russians love their homeland so much, I'm afraid they'll have to forget about Hermes helmets soon....

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