

On the 35th Anniversary of the Revolution in IRAN

"AS I RECALL"

That Events that Changed the Course of the History

BBC WORLD SERVICE

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INTERVIEW WITH AMBASSADOR ARDESHIR ZAHEDI

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BBC: The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was one of those great convulsive moments of the Twentieth Century history.

A monarchy with a lineage claiming to stretch back for some two thousand five hundred years was swept aside with a huge wave of popular protest into the hands of Shiite clergy creating the contemporary world's only theocracy. At their head was the forbidding figure of Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, the Imam as he was known to legions of followers.

Unlike many so called revolutions, in reality palace coups staged by ever more junior band of army officers, the events that led to the fall of the Shah of Iran sprang from the ground. Millions of peasants uprooted from their farms and turned into factory workers, at the wake of the monarch's whims, felt adrift in an alien new world; city dwellers felt cheated at the Western style living promised land, as corruption mounted and the economic boom ran into serious trouble. Lawyers concerned at the Shah's high hand disregard for the rule of law; poets and playwrights chafed under the heavy hand of censorship; national politicians long repressed by an all pervasive secret police force grumbled out loud as Iran's destiny appeared tied ever more tightly to the whims of the West.

To appearances, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was a man of supreme self confidence convinced of his glorious destiny and that of his

ancient country; the two were interlinked in his mind. To achieve his highly ambitious goal of vaulting Iran into the first rank of the world's nations within a single generation all obstacles would have to be brushed aside.

In an interview for the British Television in 1975, the king of kings described himself in his most imperious:

(The voice of the Shah:) *"I have absolute, and maybe because the things have turned this way, a complete trust of my people for me and vice versa and that is proven several times not only once. I am dedicated to my country because this is the most beautiful thing that could happen.*

What would I take with me when I go into the grave, not even a trifle. Maybe just a piece of white cloth. That is all. So I am philosophical enough to know these things and I have enough faith. So what I have got to take with me into the grave is history."

History was not however to be written the way the Shah had imagined. To the contemporary eyes those tumultuous mounts of 1978 and early 1979 have the air of a Greek Tragedy moving towards a preordained conclusion. It seems that there was nothing that the Shah could have done to break the downward slide. In counterpoint, the power of the clergy, long derided by the regime as ignorant obscurantist mullahs appeared to grow unchecked. Each wave of popular disturbances would produce a fresh crop of victims, martyrs whose blood would galvanize the radical clergymen and their follow-

ers to fresh efforts.

As the summer of 1978 moved into the autumn and the once all powerful Shah appeared strangely paralyzed, in the face of events he could barely comprehend, all separate strands of discontent in Iran came together. Massive crowds, one million, even two million strong, unshaven workers marching alongside society ladies turned down to the Iranian streets to tell the Shah that his thirty seven year rule had to come to its end. "Death to the Shah, Death to America and Khomeini is our leader", they chanted.

Finally on a cool January day the Shah accompanied by Empress Farah and a handful of aids slipped quietly out the embattled Iranian capital and into exile. Looking back into the final months of the Shah's rule, it might seem as if nothing could stand the tide of protest. One man who to this day feels strongly that the tide could have been reversed is Ardeshir Zahedi. Zahedi and his father General Fazlollah Zahedi had been amongst the Shah's closest followers. They played a key role in restoring the young monarch to power in 1953 overthrowing the nationalist leader Mohammad Mossadegh and were well rewarded for their pains. The old general became Prime Minister. His son married the Shah's eldest daughter and later he was made Foreign Minister.

At the time of the revolutionary turmoil, Ardeshir Zahedi was Iran's flamboyant and influential Ambassador to Washington.

There he had the ear of President Jimmy Carter and his top foreign policy advisors. In Washington, Zahedi may have been temporarily out of the mainstream of Iranian mind but he had one inestimable advantage over his other rivals in the political arena, his close relationship with the ruler. His marriage to the Shah's daughter had ended in divorce but the aloof monarch continued to treat Ardeshtir almost as his own son.

By the summer of 1978, Zahedi was anxious to get back to Tehran to help out. The Shah's closest confidant, Assadollah Alam, had died the previous winter. A long serving Prime Minister, Amir Abass Hoveyda, was in jail thrown to the wolves beginning to beg for the Shah's own blood. There was no one around wishing or able to rub in the Shah's nose and give him some good advice. Characteristically into this bridge stepped Ardeshtir Zahedi:

AZ: "That evening when I arrived, it was very late. At the airport the Foreign Minister, the Chief of Staff, many of the civilians among them the Foreign Office people, some of the friends, senators and members of the Parliament were there expecting me. It was surprising because I was supposed to go quietly and now everyone there wanted to talk to me about the situation. I then went directly to have an audience with His Majesty and that was about one thirty or quarter to two in the morning.

When I got to Sadabad Palace I was told that Her Majesty wanted absolutely to see me before I met the Shah. She was in the hall and stopped me on my way telling me that The Shah was not feeling well and that I should be careful not to say anything that might further provoke his anger. I entered His Majesty's office. I first noticed that His Majesty was terribly tired. He was also very unhappy. I immediately knew that once again something has happened in his private life. I asked him if he would not prefer that I should return in the morning so that he could get a little rest or sleep a little. He said no and told me to sit down. He rang the bell to tell the servant to bring some tea. Then he took something from his pocket, at first trying to hide it from me. It was a pill. When I asked him what it was he said nothing, a multivitamin. I knew it was more serious than that and that there were different reasons behind the state in which I found him. He was then telling me very sincerely that he was exhausted and wanted to give all the power possible to the government to solve the situation. Part of our problem, I

think, started here. The fight between the rivals, the pursuit of personal interest and ambition was intensified."

(This interview was recorded about 22 years ago, in 1992 and some 90 seconds of the interview is missing at this point.)

BBC: Can we move to the question of the Shah's state of health at that time?

AZ: "He had once complained to me that he had health problems. I had confidentially seen his doctor and he assured me that there was no problem with the heart, but I knew he was not in good position. I could easily understand it because he was tired, he could not sleep well, he had fights with his wife at night and with the people who had the confidence of the Queen and there were lots of things that were destroying the man. Besides he had a cancer and he would not like to talk about it while by then almost everybody around knew about it."

BBC: Let us now move to the events and what was happening in Teheran at that time because soon after you came back, one of the most dramatic events which was a landmark for the opposition was the shootings that took place in downtown Teheran in Jeleh Square, events that later became known to all in Iran and all over the world as the Black Friday when many people were killed (AZ: 130). Can you tell us how much of an impact it had on the Shah and on the government and how serious an event was it?

AZ: "First of all I think it was because of the mistakes of the government. At that time and precisely that Thursday, the day before the event, when I was having dinner with His Majesty and Her Majesty the Queen, the Shah said the Prime Minister has called and they want to have martial law. I said: Your Majesty I think you should be very careful about this. We went to the palace and I was there for a long period of time, for hours after the dinner.

I was against the martial law and I kept explaining to their majesties why the government should not do such a thing. The Prime Minister kept calling a few more times and His Majesty resisted. The conversation on the subject was repeated and continued until about two o'clock in the morning. At this time His Majesty went to the bedroom which was the next room to take another call from the Prime Minister so that I would no more intervene. Meanwhile I was telling the army generals that I was against this policy and that they should never

bring the army to the streets and let them sit there for days and nights in the city. If you need the army, you bring them, they do their job and go back to the barracks. That decision was a big mistake and I was always against the martial law from the beginning."

BBC: As you said the government was clearly mishandling the situation and it was not prepared for the public but it was a tragic event nonetheless which had a landmark effect on the opposition. Did you feel that somehow it had given some fresh strength to the opposition against the Shah?

AZ: "Indeed. You see, because by that time I had arranged for Amini, a former Prime Minister, and Entezam who was former minister to come and see the Shah. I had also arranged for a host of other people (BBC: But they had broken from the Shah in the past!) Yes, but these people were in the cabinets for many years and I thought that it would be good that His Majesty would hear them and talk to them. (BBC: You were trying to bring back old, respected people so that there might be a sort of national reconciliation?) Yes, firstly, I always thought that if we bring these people together, because Iran is in a way a tribal country, so if we bring different people from different parts of the country - those who have a good name - there will be understanding between them and then, they will stick together to save the nation and they would advise the Shah and each one of them will join and belong to the family and in that way they will also feel responsible, and once responsible they would act more responsibly.

Secondly we needed the king out of always using his name or letting it be used for everything. Because everything they wanted to do or if they did not want to do it or when they were afraid of doing, they always used the name of the Shah. Alright, if it turned good, it was good; if it went wrong the Shah was to blame. This is why on the question of martial law I said let the government decide and not say that it was you who wanted."

BBC: Let us now listen to what the Shah himself had to say about the events of that particular time:

(The voice of Shah): "This (the martial law) was a means to establish law and order which was unfortunately not respected before and there were so many acts of arson, and it was on the same Friday that there were a hundred

cases of arson in the city of Teheran alone and the demonstrators were not abiding by the laws or they were almost taking the laws in their own hand. That is not freedom; this is not democracy!"

BBC: We all heard the Shah here talking to a foreign audience to explain how things were happening. He was talking about freedom and democracy. Now there were many people who were cynical and who would say the Shah would only talk about these things to Western audience and that he would speak in a different language to the Iranian people. You knew him very well. Do you think that he was sincere when he talked about full democracy? After all he had a reputation of a very autocratic monarch and then at this last stage of the events?

AZ: "I really believe and very very deeply that he wanted that, but sometimes in the existing circumstances - being an individual, a human being- and we know that the power and money sadly destroy people, and this fact was sometimes and partly putting him off the course."

BBC: But if the military had truly cracked down, if they had been ordered to use all their force, and this was a very mighty war machine that had been built up by the Shah over the years with American help, could they really have made a difference? After all there were those who said that the ordinary soldiers themselves, the recruits who came from the villages, from amongst the uneducated people, were not prepared to go out fighting and shooting against their own people.

AZ: "That last part I would not accept. Otherwise yes, as you said and as it happens today in Algeria maybe it could have been done and that would have made a difference. God knows. I do not know."

BBC: Ayatollah Khomeini, as we all now know, is the person who came to power as the sole undisputed leader of the opposition. It was clear though that during the summer of 1978 he was not the only leader of the opposition. There were many different factions of secular opposition. There were leaders from the old nationalists. There were people you might describe as liberals or people who wanted a constitutional monarchy. There was the domestic clergy and some of them had close ties with the

establishment. There were very prominent religious leaders that had started helping out to organise those demonstrations. Some of them were playing the game both ways if you like, playing with the government but also with the opposition.

Now, Khomeini eventually came out on top as the single most important leader. It seems to me from my vantage point in Teheran at that time that one of the reasons for this was that the Shah gave no encouragement at all to the National Front, the secular opposition leaders of the past and eventually they decided to throw in their support to the most radical person, Ayatollah Khomeini abroad.

AZ: "I do not completely agree. I do not know first of all who the National Front was. You had some thirteen people. They were divided amongst themselves.

They even hated each other. When Doctor Sadighi wanted to accept the Prime Ministership they denounced him. When Bakhtiar came along and accepted the Prime Ministership the others denounced him. So each one of them wanted the power for himself and the National Front did not have unity or strength and the result was what we saw.

Ayatollah Shariatmadari was the strong man. He called His Majesty and I was personally involved in that and he asked the Shah not to leave the country. A grand Ayatollah from Iraq asked the same thing, yet he did it. So Khomeini being outside getting so much publicity and religious backing from others like Ayatollah Taleghani had in a way their cooperation and this is what gave him that position."

BBC: If you had regarded Khomeini as the single leader of the opposition at that time what would you have advised the Shah?

AZ: "At that time the Shah was not really in a good mood and Khomeini not as powerful as you suggest. Khomeini became Khomeini after the overthrow of the Shah because during that last period he was the one who was sitting outside and saying out loud that he, the Shah, had to go. As I said, there were so many different and sad things that combined together: the government was not capable, there were fightings between the rivals, the opposition was divided and they kept lying to the people. Once anyone of them would accept power the rest would not have anything to do with him anymore. And I think there were all these elements put together. The government in the United States did not give a clear signal and

continued with contradictory statements. In Great Britain you had the Labour Government that did not know what to do. I talked to your ambassador in Washington, Peter Jay, and I suggested that the American and the British ambassadors in Teheran should go together to see the Shah because each of them went separately and said completely different things that confused the Shah. His Majesty has said it clearly in his book that he was very confused and did not know whether to believe his own ambassador in Washington or the American ambassador in Teheran. President Carter has also referred to this situation in his book."

BBC: As you say the Carter Administration was giving mixed signals, perhaps you could give us your perspective of how you saw the divisions between the State Department and the White House over dealing with Iran.

AZ: "I agree with you, there was a division. I think there was almost no policy because the State Department, the Secretary of State himself, either had no policy or they were changing it all the time. In the White House, the President himself was a wonderful man but did not have the necessary geopolitical background. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Advisor, was completely different and the CIA had its own vision; so I think there was a total confusion amongst themselves."

BBC: What were they urging on you, what were they recommending you to advise the Shah?

AZ: "The President of the United States was asking me to tell the Shah that he should stand firm and that he should do everything possible to end the troubles. For instance the President wanted the Shah not to worry too much about the history of the human rights and yet in his comments for the press and in some official signals you could see completely different messages."

BBC: Actually we have here what President Carter had to say later on that year about the politics on Iran:

(The Voice of President Jimmy Carter:) "I would explain to the Shah to maintain power in Iran and for the present problems in Iran to be resolved. Although there had been surely deplorable incidents of bloodshed, we said that we wanted to avoid the predictions of doom and disaster and wanted to see some solutions, what had not been realised at all."

AZ: "You see, here you see the President of the United States who said from the beginning that he wanted the Shah to stay and yet at the same time he was deploring what had happened. He said the same thing to me. He, as the President of the United States, came to Iran, made a speech and said Iran was the island of stability in the whole world and then he left and gave different signals when he got back to the United States. One day he said something and another day something else. One day he was telling their ambassador something and the other day something different to me. That is what had been confusing to us all."

BBC: Meanwhile you must have been very dispirited by the way the opposition was organising increasingly larger demonstrations and they were able to bring out people from all walks of life. It started off with some clergy supporters and then more and more middle class people. The very people who had benefited from the Shah's reforms in the past were coming out into the streets and taking part in those huge demonstrations. This must have been very dispiriting.

AZ: "It was discouraging. Unfortunately everywhere in the world you have groups of people who change colour and direction and go wherever the wind goes. But first of all I believe that if the Shah had not left the country the army would not have collapsed and if that had happened then we would have had different changes. Even if the Shah wanted to abdicate, the changes would be of such a nature that would not destroy the economy and ruin the country and the bloodsheds the misery that we saw in Iran would have been avoided."

BBC: So what were you advising the Shah? Were you telling him to stand firm?

AZ: "I continued to say and I advised him that he should try and meet the opposition. As a matter of fact three times I prepared lists of different individuals from all over the country

as representatives of different sectors to come to Teheran and get together in Palace with the members of the Parliament and the Senate and that the Shah should come and say that he was tired and wanted them to discuss the situation and decide whom they want as the Prime Minister to lead the government. That they should choose and nominate three and the Shah would appoint one of them at the head of government with the necessary authority. He agreed two or three times and again somehow his decisions were changed.

I then said alright if you do not want to do that

mission of the head of state?"

BBC: General Heiser, as we know only later, was sent by the Americans for a rather strange mission. It wasn't clear whether he was there to help strengthen the military, to persuade them to dismount the troops and encourage them to stop acting against the opposition or.

AZ: "To be very honest with you and frankly speaking I do not believe that either he or the American government knew what to do because at the beginning there was talk about

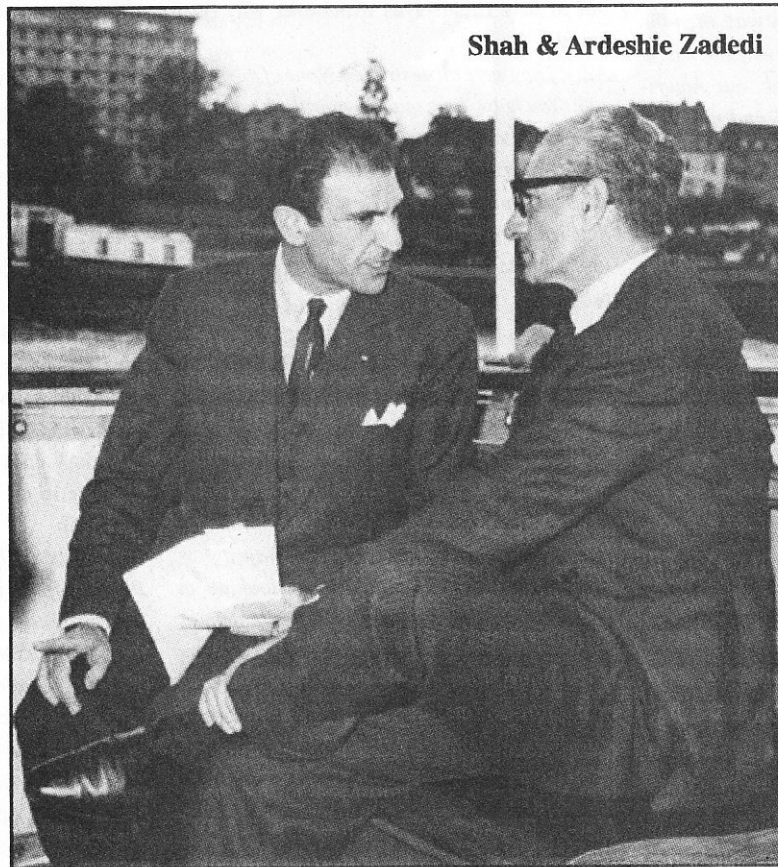
Zbigniew Brzezinski at the head of the National Security to come and then there was talk about James Slazenger and then it was General Hague but they all refused the mission and in the end it came to Heiser.

He came, in my opinion, essentially to help the army to stage a coup but in the end His Majesty was not happy. When he asked me about Heiser's mission, I said that everyone knows he is here and there is no more a secret and when he said that it was without his knowledge or permission I suggested again that either he should be arrested or he should be sent back by the same plane. Secondly it was also true that the army generals were not happy either because they thought it as an insult that an American General would come to tell them what to do. Third-

ly there was a fight between General Heiser himself and the Ambassador of the United States in Teheran. I had met general Heiser in Washington earlier, many times we had lunch together and I had letters from him. I do not believe that his coming was helpful or that he himself actually knew what he was supposed to be doing."

BBC: Who was the coup supposed to be made against? Was it a royalist coup and if so to do what?

AZ: "I think it was in the mind of the Americans, at least some of the Americans, maybe



Shah & Ardeshir Zadeh

then we should make a compromise with the opposition. This was a proposal I had made for a long time. At the same time I was against the idea that the Shah would leave the country and I told him many times and once in front of Her Majesty that if you leave, you will never come back. Once I was very mad and I told him that if you leave and if you think that your wife or your son could take your place you are wrong. That was the night that General Heiser was coming to Iran and the Shah said it was without his permission and I was really mad and said either you arrest him or you kick him out of the country. How could a high ranking general come to the country without the per-

CIA or the Defence Department or even some people in the White House that if the worse come to worse, given that the Shah was about to leave, that they could make a coup with the army, the same thing that they once did in Greece which we call the Coup of the Colonels to bring the king back and at the end the situation became even more complicated."

BBC: A pro-American military government was the result.

AZ: "If you do not have the support of a military which is royalist with the king on the top and in command, as His Majesty was, then the moment you want to get in their way the whole thing will collapse. This, I think, our American friends did not understand and underestimated."

BBC: A policy that was the result of bad judgement.

AZ: "In my opinion this was the sad truth."

BBC: What in your opinion, Mr Zahedi, among all mistakes was the most crucial blunder that the various governments inside Iran made during those final months?

AZ: "I do not think there was a government! There were three so called governments in 14 months and each of them incapable of doing anything and then another would come with a lot of noise but with no plan or power. At the same time we also had a military government and that for only five weeks. Then Mr Sadighi was supposed to become Prime Minister from the National Front and talking went on and on and everyone knows the history. He could not arrange the things because there was fighting

BBC: In the end perhaps this mission of General Heiser's was counter-productive. It led to disintegration of the morale of the armed forces....

AZ: "I could not agree with you more. Many of our generals came to me to show their anxiety. One of them even wanted to shoot Heiser in the head! This General Heiser's coming had made them more confused and they took it that he had come to tell them not to stay loyal to their king and that was more than they could swallow."

BBC: In the end they would leave and get out to save themselves whichever way they could...

AZ: "They were all destroyed. None of them was safe. You know how many generals they killed; how many colonels or how many civilians. It was a massacre which was sad and shameful. I did not think and I could never believe that Iranians could do such things especially in the name of God, especially in the name of religion."

BBC: In the end what do you think was the final thing that made the Shah decide to go?

AZ: "It was when the American Ambassador met His Majesty and asked him that he should leave at the earliest possible. As a matter of fact in one place in his book, His Majesty explains that the Ambassador was looking at his watch as if he wanted him to leave then or suggesting that it would be better then than an hour later. And this either embarrassed him or made him mad with anger or weakened his morale. In any case that was when he took his last decision and then the same thing happened with the British Ambassador"

ponents and refused to leave the country and then he could survive on the throne. Instead the Shah didn't do it and the growing chaos in the country engulfed the plan which if implemented some months earlier might have had a chance of success. In the dark last days of December 1978, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi came to the conclusion that his time was up and that he would have to leave. But where was he to go to? Zahedi was heavily preoccupied in trying to improvise some arrangements. There was no obvious safe haven. Egypt offered the Shah a temporary refuge. So it was to Cairo that the monarch first flew. From there it was on to Morocco, The Bahamas, Mexico, The United States and Panama before returning to Egypt again. Moving from pole to pole the seriously ill Shah had become in Henry Kissinger's phrase: "The Flying Dutchman."

Zahedi himself flew out of Teheran a few days before the end as the last member of the family to join the Monarch, but quarrels broke out in the Shah's dwindling entourage. Angry with the shabby treatment accorded to him and to his monarch, Zahedi decided to return to his family home in Lake Geneva. From there he reflects with some pain on the way the West dealt with the Shah.

AZ: "It is not bitterness anymore. It is mostly the sad effects it had on the United States and the rest of the world. It is rather a kind of disappointment that makes me sad as it was a bad experience for me. I had a much higher view of the European culture, the European morality. It was why we in Iran, and I myself, loved to have the Europeans and the Americans in our country. We appreciated working with them."