

Mission in the Court of Saint James

Melting of the Ice

Following the father's footsteps

The British establishment did not like the family yet
admired Ardeshir's ambassadorial talents and achievements

A more than narrow escape in Profumo Affair

How did the British Media start delving into the politicians' private lives?

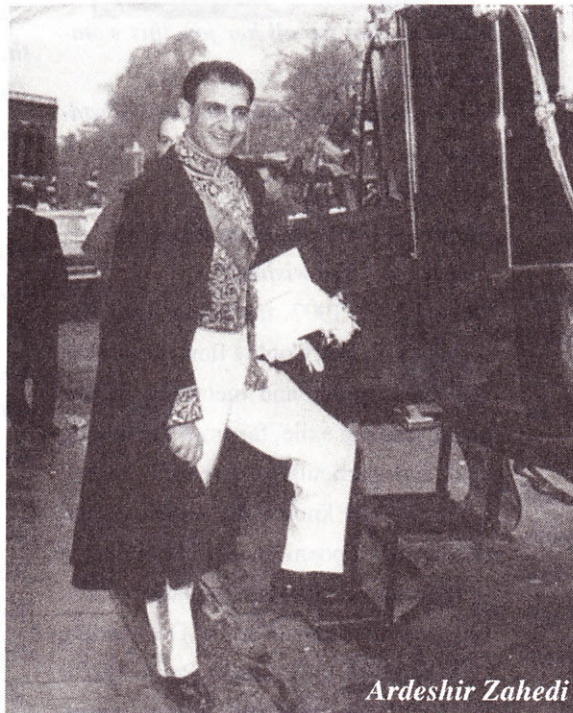
The aftermath of Suez Crisis and the British withdrawal

"There was no problem with the Confederation of Iranian Students;
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Having refused ambassadorship in France and Italy, Ardeshir Zahedi finally accepted his father's advice and the Shah's invitation to represent his country in the court of Saint James. He served there from 1962 to 1966 when he was called back to Tehran to be appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The four years in the United Kingdom were amongst the most fruitful years of his diplomatic missions. After decades of misunderstanding, suspicion, rupture and conflicts of interest especially over the nationalization of Iranian oil industry and the Persian Gulf, Zahedi managed to change the atmosphere and create the warmest relations with the government and the people of England. It was in this period that due to his negotiating abilities, his original face-to-face diplomatic approaches, and good relations with the leaders of the world his services were solicited to mediate in different regional and international conflicts.

When towards the end of 1966 af-



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ter four years of ambassadorship in London, he returned to Tehran, many British newspapers and political circles expressed regret that an exciting and controversial diplomat had left London. Hardly a week went by when there were no articles or photographs in various London newspapers about his mediatic and popular character.

In his Memoirs, Mr Zahedi has devoted a whole chapter of the second

volume to the relations with the United Kingdom where he provides an enlightening record of those momentous four years of Iranian diplomatic history.

Following are extracts of that part of his Memoirs that reveal how by forgetting the bitter memories of the past and overcoming personal emotions, through his good will and charming personality he won the hearts of everyone he met and was soon considered the most popular, uncommon and unpredictable diplomat in London.

Question: *The period of your term as Iranian Ambassador in London coincided with the height of the Cold War, and some major developments both in Britain and in Iran, and in Iran's international relations. What would you like to tell us about the developments during that sensitive period of history?*

Zahedi: *The decade of the 1340s in our calendar or the 1960s in the*

Western calendar witnessed many developments in East-West relations, as well as the start of some momentous and fundamental changes in Iran. During the early years of that decade, we saw the start of the most important reforms in Iran, namely the Land Reform, followed by other reforms, the most important of which was to grant Iranian women the right to vote and to be elected to office, thus enabling half of the Iranian population to take part in public affairs, something that they well deserved. That action, especially at that time, enhanced Iran's standing and reputation in the world. Let us not forget that at the time when Iranian women achieved the right to vote and to be voted to office, many women in the developing countries, and even in some European countries, were denied those rights. Here in Switzerland where we are talking together, women got the right to vote in national elections in the year 1971, or eight years after Iranian women had achieved that right. It is rather amusing that while many people regarded Iran as a chauvinistic country, when a referendum was held in Switzerland on whether to give the vote to women or not, a third of men opposed it. In the small European country of Lichtenstein women got the vote only in 1973.

In any case, we witnessed how the majority of Iranian people warmly welcomed those reforms and only a small minority of people who regarded those reforms to be contrary to their interests opposed them. During that decade, the first steps were also taken to take Iran out of

the ranks of the poor and underdeveloped countries that depended on loans from foreign countries.

Of course, we can speak for hours on these issues, but this is not the place for it. However, it is important to refer to two fundamental changes that came about at that time. The first development was the start of a gradual process of creating a balance in Iran's international relations between the Eastern and Western powers, and strengthening the foundations of peace and friendship among all nations. The second development concerned the first steps that were taken by the Shah and the people of Iran to safeguard Iran's legitimate rights in connection with its oil resources.

Iran that had experienced poverty and hardship both before and after the Second World War, with the gradual improvement in its economic situation, was the first country that took the initiative to help the poorer countries. You may remember that it was at the beginning of the decade of the 1960s when the Shah proposed that the rich and developed countries of the world ought to devote the equivalent of one day of their annual budgets in the form of foreign aid to poorer countries through UNESCO. That proposal was received enthusiastically by poor countries in those days, but the countries that had the economic wealth to implement that proposal, while praising it and using nice words about it, took no steps to implement it. Nevertheless, the Shah was not put off by that indifference, and during the following decade he implemented his goals,

either through bilateral agreements or through some international organizations, such as OPEC.

Question: During the early years of the decade of 1960s, namely when you were in London, Britain also underwent many important changes in all fields. Is this not the case?

Zahedi: Precisely! At the time when I started my mission in England, Harold Macmillan's Conservative Government was in power. Of course, the international standing and power of Britain was gradually declining. From an economic point of view, the damage that Great Britain had suffered during the Second World War was still being repaired. However, despite those economic problems that were quite noticeable, Macmillan made his famous comment "You have never had it so good."

Contrary to Iran that did not need to stretch her hand to foreign countries for loans, Britain was still counting on Washington's economic aid, which of course was not provided purely as a philanthropic gesture. France, and especially General De Gaulle, had blocked Britain's membership of the European Common Market. As a result, in comparison with other European economic powers, Britain's economy was lagging behind. The combination of those factors meant that Britain was no longer regarded as a great power. In repeated opinion polls, the majority of the British people indicated that they were rather pessimistic about the future of their country or their own future prospects. Some of those problems were of course due to some ancient and inhibiting

traditions of previous centuries, which were not of much practical use during the second half of the twentieth century.

Question: It seems that Macmillan himself was a true symbol of those ancient customs and traditions.

Zahedi: You may know that Macmillan came to power in January 1957, following the collapse of Anthony Eden's government over the ill-fated invasion of Egypt in October 1956, with the participation of France and Israel, after Gamal Abdel Nasser had nationalized the Suez Canal, but the invasion of Egypt angered President Eisenhower.

I remember very well that shortly after that invasion and before President Eisenhower had expressed his opposition to it, the leaders of Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Turkey had come together to take part in the summit meeting of the Baghdad Pact (which later on was renamed CENTO). The Shah of Iran was the first leader who expressed his opposition to the invasion of Egypt and the occupation of the Suez Canal. Acting on the Shah's initiative, the conference also condemned the joint operations by London, Paris and Tel Aviv, and Nasser expressed his gratitude for that support.

There is no doubt that that adventurous policy by Anthony Eden, the British Prime Minister and successor to Winston Churchill, delivered the biggest blow to Britain's global reputation. It was during that fiasco that Moscow also suppressed the revolution in Hungary and Russian tanks rolled into Budapest. However, the Suez crisis that resulted in Anthony

Eden's resignation on the excuse of illness had the effect of putting an end to the gunboat diplomacy of big powers. It also delivered the second big blow to Britain after the nationalization of Iranian oil.

Question: Macmillan's government also fell a short time later.

Zahedi: Yes, but it was mainly due to the intensification of discontent about economic problems and unemployment. However, what speeded up the collapse of Macmillan's government was the secret affair between John Profumo, secretary of state for war, and a young woman called Christine Keeler, which came to be known as the Profumo Affair.

Question: What was the story behind the affair?

Zahedi: The story involved a secret affair between John Profumo and Christine Keeler. So far, the scandal only involved the secretary of state for war who, despite being a married man, had engaged in a secret affair with Christine Keeler for about two years. However, the issue became much more serious when it was revealed that simultaneously with her affair with John Profumo, Christine Keeler had also been the mistress of Eugene Ivanov, the former military attaché of the former Soviet Union and an alleged spy, especially at a time when the Cold War between the East and the West had reached its height. This was about a year after the issue of the stationing of Soviet missiles in Cuba had dragged the world to the edge of a nuclear war, and when the wound that President Kennedy had inflicted on Nikita

Khrushchev had not yet healed.

In any case, the rumor about a secret affair between the secretary of state for war and a call girl became the source of gossip in Britain's political and aristocratic circles, and the press also began to publish some articles about that affair. However, due to the existing secrecy laws that prevented the publication of unproven allegations, John Profumo's name had not yet been made public, until eventually the issue was raised in the House of Commons, and Profumo strongly denied those rumors. Of course, before the question had been asked about the issue in the House of Commons, Prime Minister Macmillan had summoned Profumo and had asked him about the affair, but Profumo had assured him that there was no basis to the rumor.

Following the denial of the rumor in the House of Commons and Macmillan's support for his secretary of state for war, the press that had discovered some facts about the affair did not let go until, as is still customary in the British press, the issue was taken up by other sections of the press and was spread throughout the world. Ms. Keeler who came from a poor family sold her story to one of the tabloid newspapers in London, and Profumo could not deny the affair any longer. The discovery of the fact that he had lied to the House of Commons forced him to resign from the cabinet and from the House of Commons, although later on it was established that in the course of that affair no state secrets had been leaked to Moscow.

To be continued

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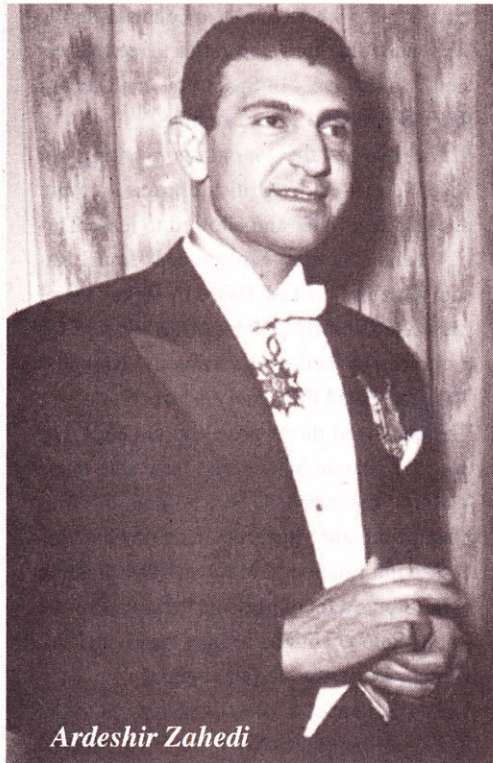
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Question: Somewhere you have written that an Iranian was also involved in the issue. Of course, by that I do not mean you.

Zahedi: No, it certainly was not me, but I escaped danger by the skin of my teeth. As the result of certain reports and subtle hints by some of my friends, including my secretary Ms. Alison David, I had been pre-warned of the danger of being present at the weekend parties at Lord Astor's country residence. The initial friendship between Christine Keeler and John Profumo and Eugene Ivanov had started in that house. Ms. Alison David who was a lady of a certain age was very proficient in her work. Furthermore, due to her past experiences, she had the names, the details and the biographies of many influential people in her computer-like mind. She was very influential in London's aristocratic and political circles and addressed most well-known personalities of the time by their first names.

That influence and knowledge was the result of many years of acting as the secretary to some prominent figures, such as Neville Chamberlain and Winston Churchill, two former British prime ministers. She had also spent some time



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at St James's Palace, and at the beginning of my work in London her friendship and help was of great value to me. This is why after winning the agreement of the British Foreign Office, I appointed her as my social secretary at the Iranian Embassy. Of course, some people criticized that appointment, because they feared that embassy secrets might not be secure, but I never reported very sensitive issues to Tehran through the usual channels at the Embassy, in order

to make sure that their security would not be compromised.

It would be appropriate to mention one example of such precautions that I took. During the oil talks in London, to which I have referred earlier, the Shah issued some orders to me on the telephone from Morocco to convey to the British side in the talks. Recently, while reviewing the documents of the British Foreign Office about that period, I came across an interesting report. Referring to the Shah's instructions conveyed through the Iranian Embassy in London, the report states: "We do not have any evidence of the Shah's conversation with the ambassador." It is clear – and it was not unexpected – that the officials in charge of eavesdropping in London were monitoring all the telephone conversations of the Embassy. As it happens, I had used the telephone number of one of my family members in London in order to talk to the Shah.

In any case, when I received the invitation from Lord Astor, I accepted it because I was not aware of any of the rumors that were being circulated at that time, especially as they had told me verbally that President Muhammad Ayub Khan of Pakistan would also at-

tend that reception. In view of the close relations between Iran and Pakistan, it was natural that I would try to seize the opportunity of meeting Pakistan's president again. However, it was after I had accepted the invitation that, in addition to Alison David, some other friends including Cecil King, an influential journalist in England, also warned me about the risk of taking part in that weekend reception. A week before that reception, I had gone to the annual horse races in Ascot, accompanied by Lord and Lady Shawcross; and Her Majesty the Queen and other members of the Royal Family also went to those races. During the journey, Lord Shawcross who was regarded as one of Iran's trusted friends, deliberately spoke about the reception at Lord Astor's country residence, and indirectly warned me against attending that reception.

Question: So, as you said, you escaped danger by the skin of your teeth.

Zahedi: Exactly! On the day that I was due to take part in the reception, Ms. Alison David phoned Lord Astor and apologized and said that I would not be able to take part in the 48-hour weekend reception due to an unforeseen visit by the late Qoli Naseri, the Shah's civil adjutant, who incidentally was also one of my close friends. However, Lord Astor had insisted that at least I had to go to have lunch with them and to take Qoli Naseri with me.

The truth is that I was tempted to go and find out what was going on and try to understand the truth of the matter in order that I could send a firsthand report to the Shah. Consequently, I accepted the invitation and together with Qoli Naseri we went to Lord Astor's country residence for lunch. Unfortunately, we were a little late for lunch, but in

the afternoon Lord Astor showed us his beautiful garden. While walking in the garden, from behind the trees and the hedges I caught a glimpse of the swimming pool, in which a number of men and women including Ayub Khan were swimming. Later on, when the report of Ayub Khan's participation in that reception had been leaked, Pakistan's ambassador who had also been a military officer issued a statement denying that Ayub Khan had taken part in the reception, adding that it was the ambassador himself who had gone to the reception. A short while later, Pakistan's ambassador was moved from London and I think he became Pakistan's ambassador in Switzerland.

Anyway, by witnessing the scenes about which I had heard some rumors, I told Qoli Naseri that we had to leave the reception as soon as possible. He too said that he was not feeling very well and therefore we left immediately for London.

However, the rumor about the involvement of an Iranian national was true. A few days after the details of what had gone on at the reception had leaked, police had gone to the scene to investigate. Following the police raid, a young Iranian came to the Iranian consulate in a state of panic and said that he had to meet with me immediately. The late Manouchehr Zelli and the late Parviz Khonsari, both of whom were ministers plenipotentiary at the Embassy, arranged a meeting between him and me. That young man whose name I am not morally at liberty to reveal, owned a disco with a couple of other people in Soho in London, which was a meeting place for young people. It was at that disco that Christine Keeler had been introduced to Lord Astor, and she and her friends had been invited to Lord Astor's

country residence. This young man who had been interrogated by the police was worried that his parents in Iran would be informed of what had happened. In any case, I reassured him that he did not need to worry, as he had not done anything wrong.

Question: Both a film, Scandal, and a musical were made about those events too.

Zahedi: The Christine Keeler affair was one of the most interesting tragicomedies that could not have been made up. John Profumo who died in March 2006 at the age of 91, shortly after his resignation as the secretary of state for war turned to charity work and began to work as a volunteer cleaner, cleaning toilets in Toynbee Hall, a charity in East London, which had been set up to help poor people, and he continued this work for 40 years. Alongside his charitable work, he used his political skills and contacts to become Toynbee Hall's chief fundraiser, and he managed to collect large sums for that charitable organization. Of course, towards the end of his life, in order to express her appreciation for Profumo's services, in 1975 Her Majesty the Queen awarded him a CBE and in this way he regained some respectability.

Christine Keeler was another member of the cast in that tragedy who was jailed for a while, and Stephen Ward who had introduced Christine Keeler and her friends to the establishment figures committed suicide in fear of being sent to jail. However, Valerie Hobson, Profumo's faithful wife who was a beautiful actress, forgave her husband, stayed with him, and like him she also devoted herself to charity until her death in 1998.

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Question: I suppose that that event was a turning point in the history of relations between the government and the press, and old traditions began to be discarded one after another.

Zahedi: Without doubt! It was not the first time that Profumo had played a decisive role in his country's history. He also played a role in the fate of the Second World War, because he was one of the figures who voted against Neville Chamberlain and forced him to resign, which led to the formation of the Coalition Government headed by Winston Churchill, who conducted the war against Nazi Germany. As you know, Chamberlain was not very keen on declaring war against Hitler. However, at the age of 25, Profumo took part in a by-election and was elected to the House of Commons as the

youngest Conservative MP. Shortly afterwards, he voted against Chamberlain's Conservative Government. It was his vote that forced the government to lose its majority in 1940, which immediately led to the formation of Churchill's Coalition Government, which is another long story.

However, after the Christine Keeler scandal, the press was emboldened and began to delve into the private lives of politicians, and that scrutiny has continued to the present time. At the mo-



Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Ardeshir Zahedi

ment, the press will not forgive any politician for any misconduct. One example of intense press scrutiny can be seen in the case of Tony Blair's resignation as the Labor Party Prime Minister. In my view, more than anything else, his resignation was due to the continuous criticisms and incessant barbs by the press. Above all, it was as the result of the unceasing lashes of the BBC for Blair's participation in the invasion of Iraq and following President George Bush's policies that Blair was eventually forced to resign.

Question: This was an interesting story. With the collapse of Macmillan's government in October 1963, Lord Alec Douglas-Home became prime minister by renouncing his title. His period at the helm as prime minister was short, and in the subsequent general election in October 1964 the Labor Party led by Harold Wilson won the election and put an end to the Conservatives' 13-year rule. That election ushered in a new era in Britain, not only in the renunciation of many old customs and traditions at home, but it also brought about some major changes in Britain's foreign policy and the decline of Britain as a world power. What were the effects of those changes in Britain's relations with Iran?

Zahedi: Although the Labor Party's victory had been anticipated, yet it was not a foregone conclusion. In that election the Labor Party won by only a few seats more than the Conservatives. Of course, without knowing what the outcome of the election would be, we had established extensive links with some influential figures in the Labor Party in order to learn of their views regarding international and regional issues. This was done both by the political counselors of the Embassy as well as by myself. The election night and the counting of votes created a great deal of inter-

est and enthusiasm throughout Britain, especially as at that time the television and the minute-by-minute broadcasting of the voting results had intensified the extent of interest and excitement. Shortly after midnight it became almost clear that the Labor Party led by Harold Wilson had won the election. I used that opportunity to be the first foreign ambassador in Britain to send a message of congratulations to Harold Wilson with a bouquet of flowers and a case of caviar. Together with a number of my colleagues at the Embassy we were watching the election results on television when a BBC reporter revealed our secret and reported the arrival of "caviar by the Iranian ambassador". The following day, that report was given wide coverage in the British press.

In any case, at the beginning, the Labor Government created a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm among the people. However, due to having been away from power for a thirteen-year period, it did not seem to be as effective in government as had been expected. The main problem was Great Britain's weak economy. Nevertheless, despite those weak capabilities, there were a great many ideas, thoughts, and new programs that were in keeping with the new realities of the age. Initially, Harold Wilson had been leaning towards the left wing of the Labor Party, but when he was given the hot potato of running the country he came to terms with the realities.

So far as it concerned Iran, we did not experience any fundamental changes in our relations with London simply due to the change of government from the Conservatives to Labor. We had realized that any basic change in our relations with great powers would come about as the result of making Iran more

powerful, especially as we had not had a good experience of the Labor Government led by Clement Attlee and his Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin, that had come to power after the Second War in 1945. However, the most important change that was brought about by the Labor Government under Harold Wilson was to bring to an end Britain's military presence East of Suez and in the Persian Gulf. The man who initiated that policy was Denis Healy (now Lord Healy) who was the defense secretary in Wilson's government, who wished to bring some order and logic to Britain's military policy and to rationalize military spending in keeping with the size and capabilities of the British economy. In my view, Lord Healy is one of the most distinguished politicians in contemporary Britain. It is a popular saying in England that "Denis Healy was the best Prime Minister that Britain never had." Denis Healy was a true friend of Iran and respected Iran's desire to grow and develop. He realized how important and vital the presence of a powerful Iran was for the stability of the Middle East and South-West Asia. Of course, Iran too responded positively to Healy's friendship towards Iran, and you may remember that when in the middle of the 1970s Denis Healy was chancellor of exchequer he used his close relations with Iran to obtain a two billion dollar loan for Great Britain. It was after that agreement that Healy said in the House of Commons: "Thanks to the Shah of Iran, the government will reduce the rate of VAT from 10 per cent to seven and a half per cent."

Getting back to the main topic under discussion, I should say that we knew from some confidential sources that at least at the beginning Wilson himself was opposed to the withdrawal of British forces from East of Suez. For us,

who had always been against the presence of British forces in the Persian Gulf, we were naturally pleased with that decision, but we also had some concerns about it. We knew that as the most important and most populous country among all the Persian Gulf littoral states, the great responsibility for ensuring the stability and security of the region would naturally rest on our shoulders. This was especially important in view of the fact that Gamal Abdel-Nasser had turned his attention to the southern Persian Gulf states, also Iraq was dreaming of conquering Kuwait, and Moscow too was pursuing its historical dream of gaining access to the warm waters of the Persian Gulf.

The developments that followed the British decision to withdraw her military forces from East of Suez, which eventually led to the independence of a number of sheikhdoms in the southern parts of the Persian Gulf in 1970, were so profound and so complex that if the occasion arises I will talk about them in more detail when I speak in my *Memoirs* of the time that I served as Iran's foreign minister. However, it is important to point out here that, alongside some domestic developments and in view of the importance that Iran had gained as an important factor for the stability of the region, we witnessed a period of mutual respect and equality with some traditional powers. That period marked a turning point in Iran's global relations, both in the region where we lived, as well as in the countries and regions that were close to Iran. If any problem arose in any of those areas, the Shah of Iran was the first person to whom the international community turned to "make use of his best efforts" (in the diplomatic jargon) to resolve the differences.