

My Father's Photograph

For some eight-odd years, the Iranian Embassy in Paris had occupied a stately but decrepit mansion in the Rue Fortuny, a quiet street off the Parc Monceau. Chancery and residence were in the main building while a nondescript two-story brick building in the interior courtyard housed the consulate.

During his term in Paris as ambassador in the early seventies, my father needled the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran out of its habitual torpor into realizing that Iran should be represented in a manner more suited to its growing prestige. As a result, a difficult task befell my parents: the house in the Rue Fortuny was renovated to be used solely as the residence. The consulate in the courtyard was torn down to make room for a delightful garden *à la persane*, complete with a blue-tiled pool and tinkling fountain. Also, a magnificent building located 4 avenue d'Iéna was bought for the chancery.

The concierges at the residence were a Romanian couple named Jules, a definite fixture after several decades of service to a succession of Iranian ambassadors. For the chancery, another concierge was hired, Mme Hue. Unremarkable in appearance with her washed-out coloring, she was an even-tempered woman in her late fifties who got along famously with everyone. As did the rest of the staff, she worshiped the ground my father walked on and missed him sorely when he left. After my parents' return to Iran, whenever I attended receptions at the embassy, Mme Hue never failed to spend a few moments with me, reminiscing about "Monsieur l'Ambassadeur."

My family was more than a little instrumental in changing the geography of the Iranian representation in Paris. While my father was responsible for the changes in chancery and residence, my husband, cultural counselor at the time, spurred *his* Ministry, that of Cultural Affairs, out of the torpor that equaled if not surpassed that of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, into establishing a much-needed cultural center. A charming house was acquired in the more intellectual *sixième arrondissement* and also redecorated. When completed, this house hosted conferences and exhibits, in addition providing Iranian scholars with a good reference library (which I was in charge of).

During our grand tour of the chancery of the Avenue d'Iéna after my father bought it, and during the parties he was fond of giving, turning the Iranian Embassy into one of the most brilliant in Paris, little did I imagine that revolution was just around the corner. Or that I would in later years have to get used to seeing the Islamic Republic flag flying above the stately mansion. Or that the French police would have to deploy around it, on a twenty-four-hour basis, its danger-zone apparatus, complete with railings to forbid passage in the immediate vicinity, and that armored buses filled with bored CRS (the French riot police troops) and detectives in civilian clothes monitoring passersby and checking suspect movements would become an ugly and permanent addition to the lovely avenue.

Nor could I foresee that with the advent of Khomeini, our cultural center would become a crossroad for an arms traffic to the point that it was finally shut down by the French authorities, a heavy chain and padlock clamped on the delicate wrought-iron gate I had so lovingly selected and ordered from one of the last great artisans in the field.

Throughout the years, I had, among other ventures, studied photography. When my father's mission in Paris came to an end, he asked me to take a picture of him for the portrait gallery of past envoys: three rows of photographs in identical walnut frames hanging on one wall of the conference room. The first one was not a photograph, but a likeness done in charcoal of Nazar Agha, a diplomat of the late 1880s and a close friend of my father's grandfather.

The first pictures that I shot, in the garden of the residence, were not satisfactory. My father looked bloated and imbued with self-importance, hardly in character for a man who had disinvented the ego. I insisted on another shoot, and he managed to squeeze in a half hour in the tight schedule of his last day in Paris, just before leaving for the airport.

It was mid morning, a perfect day in September. I photographed him in the sunlit rooms of the second floor. Self-conscious as always before a camera, he kept asking me to hurry.

After the shooting session, I accompanied my parents to the airport and then rushed back to my darkroom. The pictures came out well. For the official photograph, I chose one that I believe captured the essence of my father's personality, benign and caustic at the same time. The well-proportioned face, with the strong Pakravan nose and amused expression, is that of a man who knows the world, who has pierced its secrets and gone beyond them, yet remains curious and ever hopeful of miracles.

I sent a print to Tehran. My father acknowledged that it looked dignified and subdued enough to figure in the portrait gallery. I then took

a copy to the person in charge at the embassy. It received a walnut frame and found its place on the wall of the conference room.

In February 1979, Khomeini returned to Iran to reap the fruits of the hatred that had kept him alive and biding his time, first in Iraq, then in Neauphle-le-Chateau (where the French President, Giscard d'Estaing, spread a welcome mat for him and offered him the logistics necessary to overthrow the shah, one of France's closest friends and allies). Ugly forces were unleashed in Iran. Dignitaries of the shah's regime were arrested and submitted to mock trials. Wave after wave of executions, among them my father's, followed.

I lived in Paris through all this turmoil, as I had for many years before and would for many years after. At some point, I had heard that the Jules had been summarily dismissed from the residence, but that Mme Hue was still employed at the chancery. Several weeks after my father's execution, she called me. I wondered how the aging, courteous French woman got along with the new breed of Iranian diplomats—black-bearded and charcoal-eyed—who took an incomprehensible pride in sartorial disorder and considered rudeness, especially to the media and to the authorities of the host country, as both a birthright and a measure of their revolutionary ardor.

In all fairness, one must add that the fault didn't lie all on their side, as both journalists and French officials gazed dewy-eyed at the new regime and its representatives, reveling in the strutting, macho appearance on the world scene of the Islamic whip-bearers and their stern morals.

I knew Mme Hue was taking a risk in calling me. After a quick exchange of greetings, she came to the point.

"I'd like to see you," she said. "I have something for you."

"Can you tell me what it is?" I asked.

"A photograph of M. l'Ambassadeur."

The embassy had not yet become the entrenched camp it would later, with all the diplomats living in under the ever watchful eyes of the French CRS. Mme Hue and I set a time in the evening when she would be alone. She met me outside the embassy and gave me a parcel wrapped in newspaper. I was worried for her, but she said it was all right.

"They're not here at this hour," she said, a world of contempt in her voice. She added wistfully, "When I think of the parties M. l'Ambassadeur used to give "

Her vague gesture toward the deserted mansion evoked other, better times. Then she mentioned the photograph.

"I wanted you to have it. With these people, you never know. I thought maybe they would take the pictures down and burn them, or throw them away, or God knows what."

I wondered whether she had been as concerned about the photographs of my father's one or two successors under whom she had also served.

"Did you take others?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. Only that of M. l'Ambassadeur."

We are so ill-equipped to deal with emotionally weighted moments such as these that I then did something that even now I wince to remember: I gave Mme Hue a tip.

She was taken aback. It was an unforgivable gesture, a heartless way to repay a kind and brave woman. Aware of the atrocious blunder even as I committed it, I tried as best I could to repair the damage, mumbling that I knew that she had taken great risks. That the very nature of the risks precluded any possible payment was horrifyingly clear by then, but it was too late. To attempt to justify an unjustifiable action, I can shift some of the blame onto my father, all the more easily because he is not here to refuse to shoulder it: in one of his more cynical moments, he had said in jest that no one was above accepting a tip, it all depended on the amount, and it was quite an art to know how much and to whom to dole out money when the necessity arose.

Mme Hue, a better person than I, didn't refuse my tip, but must have been wounded to the core. She told me that she would have a memorial Mass said for my father, an expense, I knew, that my paltry gratuity would certainly not cover. Several days later, she called to give me the time of the service and the name of the church where it was to be held. When my mother and I arrived, she was waiting for us at the door and greeted us with deference, as though we were still the ambassador's wife and daughter.

The photograph, in its walnut frame, hangs above the desk where I do most of my writing. Untouched by time and events, my father wears his benign, caustic expression.

