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SHADOWS IN THE GARDEN: WOMEN AGENTS UNDERGROUND AND COMMUNIST ACTIVISM IN MID-20TH CENTURY IRAN. PART II

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Abstract: *The second part of this article on the clandestine activities of Iranian female communists explores the case of Zuleykha Asadi, a young woman who earned a medical degree in Moscow just before the start of the Second World War. Her story can be told with unusual immediacy thanks to the preservation of her correspondence in the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, published here for the first time. Zuleykha's father's letters to her in Moscow chart the difficulties and decisions his daughter faced and are suffused with a parent's anxious concern for his daughter and a deep belief in the Soviet Union and its mission. Upon returning to Iran, ostensibly to practice medicine, Zuleykha also acted as a Soviet operative, keeping her handlers in Moscow apprised of her activities in letters that are a striking mix of ciphered intelligence reporting and emotional frankness about her personal life and experiences, such as her feelings for her newborn daughter and absent husband. She gathered intelligence about the wartime mood, conditions and activity of Nazi agents in the country, liaised with Iranian communists, and planned to set up a safe house. Within two years, for reasons unstated, Moscow decided to cut her loose. The case file of this idealistic young woman is emblematic of the magnetic pull of Communist ideals for many in the working class of Iran in the first half of the 20th century.*

Keywords: Iran, Soviet Union, Second World War, communist activism, espionage, female agents, Comintern, Zuleykha Asadi.

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ZULEYKHA: THE TRUSTING SPY

“You are part of a team of many millions that is creating the greatest and grandest of all that has been,
and is, in the history of humankind.”

Abdul Kasem Asadi, Zuleykha's father

The touching and intriguing case of Sharif Zuleykha Asadi can be told with an unusual immediacy because much of her correspondence with father, friends and colleagues has been preserved in the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History. These letters simultaneously reveal and conceal: frank expressions of optimism, anxiety and hope share the page with ciphered intelligence reports.

Sharif Zuleykha Asadi was born in 1916 in Tehran. By her teens, she was dreaming of studying Orientalism in the Soviet Union and becoming a writer. She already knew Russian, as she had studied at the Soviet School in Tehran where her father, Abdul Kasem, taught. He was the driving force behind her move to Moscow and involvement in the communist cause.

Abdul Kasem Asadi was well acquainted with the inside of prisons both in Siberia and Iran. Before the Russian Revolution, like multitudes of Iranians, he had labored in the harsh conditions of the Baku oil fields. And as with many of his countrymen, Abdul Kasem was inspired there by new and incendiary ideas spreading through Europe and Russia about radically changing the conditions in which people worked and lived. He began participating in revolutionary activities, was caught and sent to Siberia. Just prior to the First World War, he managed to escape back to Iran, where he took part in the Gilan uprising¹. He then traveled again to Russia, now part of the Soviet Union, receiving training as a teacher. Upon returning to Iran, he was once more sent to prison, this time for about a year. Abdul Kasem had seen much of the worst that the Iranian and Russian states and economic systems had to offer laborers and dissidents in the early 20th Century. For him, the road to revolution was an obvious one to take. After release from the latest term in his cycle of imprisonments, he became a Communist Party member and began attending party congresses [*GARF*, Fund 1318, Inv. 1, Case 657, p. 34].

The Teheran school where Abdul Kasem taught was operated primarily for the children of Soviet citizens, but he was able to enroll his daughter, and she learned excellent Russian there. In 1932, Zuleykha traveled to Moscow, staying with a former Soviet consul who had gotten to know her father in Iran. The Iranian revolutionary and poet Hesabi, now living in Moscow as a member of the Soviet Communist Party, vouched for her, opening the door for enrolment at a Soviet educational institution². Father and daughter's dreams were becoming reality.

From Moscow, Zuleykha began a correspondence with her father that reveals much about her and her father's mindset, aspirations, and concerns. The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History contains only her father's letters to her, but as Abdul Kasem is usually answering or referring to something his daughter has written, we also learn about her letters to him. The typed letters seem to have been written in Russian – a sign of the enthusiasm father and daughter had for the new cause – although it's possible they are translations of handwritten originals in Persian that have not been preserved.

Zuleykha was first drawn to study Orientalism in Leningrad, with its strong scholarly tradition in classical Persian literature, or at KUTV in Moscow. But from Tehran, her father advised her to study medicine so she could better help her country:

Dear Zuleykha, ... you are a grownup and I am not going to force my views on you but rather advise... If you are only interested in Orientalism, then the one realistic option is the Eastern Institute in Moscow. In Leningrad the weather is overcast for most of the year. Although I've never been to Leningrad, I know that people from the South and the Caucasus have difficulty with the Leningrad climate. Think over everything well... So the choice remains between the Moscow Eastern University and the medical university... Later, if you have the desire and a gift for writing, then being a doctor armed with science and knowledge, you will better understand everyday life. I believe that in order to write, one has to know different perspectives. In a word, think this through based on reason, not a passing fancy...

¹ The short-lived Socialist Soviet Republic of Iran established in the northern Iranian province of Gilan from 1920 to 1921.

² Abdol-Hossein Hesabi was a former head of Communist Party of Iran, and from 1928 a member of the Communist Party of the USSR. He had been one of the very first students at KUTV, where he later taught, and worked as an office manager at the headquarters of Tekhperiodiki [Technical Periodicals].

You are for now the only [Iranian] product of the Tehran Soviet School, and you must live up to its hopes in an honorable way.

Love you, your father,
Asadi

Zuleykha followed her father's advice. She was granted a stipend and space in the dormitory at the First Moscow Medical Institute. In their continuing correspondence, her father mentions sending her care packages of fruits, pistachios and almonds from Iran. He shares details about the changes occurring in the Iranian capital: "Teheran and all of Persia are taking on a new image. All the men wear caps and hats. Many of the schoolgirls have discarded the veil" [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 382, p. 42].

The anxious father is often trying to keep up his daughter's spirits, as in this letter from 1935:

Dear Zuleykha, I received your letter of May 2nd of this year. Reading it, I understood by your shaky handwriting and by its contents that you have fallen into a state of melancholy³. This is no good and very sad for me. Maybe I am to blame for it... [but] there is no excuse for falling into apathy in the environment you are in. You are part of a team of many millions that is creating the greatest and grandest of all that has been, and is, in the history of humankind [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 382, p. 43].

At one point, Zuleykha became so homesick she decided to visit Iran, but her father was against it: he feared she would not be allowed out again:

Dear Zuleykha,

I received your letter from the 4th of June with the unpleasant news... that you are homesick and strongly wish to come to Iran, risking everything. It seems it is not fated for you to have a full education and become a doctor. After four years your patience is up, and despite everything, you want to come to Iran... I cannot force my views on you... [but] you must know parents are not around forever. Our lives are on the wane, while yours are just beginning to rise. You must think about yourself, while I, as a father, must think about all of you, about the children, and not about myself. This year I cannot advise you to come, but in the future I am confident the situation will improve [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 382, p. 37].

Zuleykha held the course, remaining in Moscow and graduating from the medical institute in 1939 as a pediatrician. After that, she worked for two years in children's clinics, but not without difficulties: finding and keeping a place to live was a constant problem, and once she was hit with a steep fine for being late to work. To make matters worse, her father had been arrested again in Iran. This time he was held for three-and-a-half years. Then World War Two came to the East, bringing hardship even to those parts of the Soviet Union and Iran not directly involved in the fighting.

How much these events affected Zuleykha's next decision, we do not know; but an archival document from September 1941 marks the first indication of a connection between Zuleykha and Soviet intelligence, one apparently made on her initiative. She was now "available to" the IKKI, or the Executive Committee of the Comintern, the organization responsible for directing the activities of communist parties throughout the world, including intelligence gathering. A 1942 report from the IKKI with the stamp of "Top Secret" reads:

She is expressing a desire to work in our line, but has no training at all in this field. Moreover, our observation has shown her to be too trusting toward people, and because of this, she might easily make mistakes. So we will have to work with her a great deal.

³ An indication that some of the correspondence was handwritten.

A few months later, another report includes information about a life change for Zuleykha and how it might affect her intelligence work:

During her time together with Zoger in Moscow and in Ufa, Asadi Zuleykha married him, and she is now pregnant with his child. This circumstance complicates using her for work only in the short term... it would be advantageous to send her to her homeland in the near future.

Within a month of this last report, a pregnant Zuleykha was already on her way back home to Iran. The year was 1942. Before departing, she had an emotional visit with her husband Zoger in Kuybyshev (now named Samara) on the Volga. Zoger was not going to Iran. It seems he was also performing military or espionage work and needed elsewhere. Zuleykha later writes this about him:

And do not forget there is always a black hole in me – [the absence of] my Russian husband. The laws of Islam do not permit a woman to leave her husband, ever, so I believe that sooner or later I will return to my “family hearth,” if he remains alive. I am confident they cannot kill him, no matter what. Don’t ever tell me [if you learn otherwise].

In May, while waiting to leave for Iran, Zuleykha writes to a “comrade Georgiev” with mixed feelings:

Today happiness has smiled again, and I will be flying out tomorrow morning. So tomorrow I will already be in Baku and stay there for only a short time. As I get closer, I start to worry more. There’s no reason, it seems, but anxiety grows all the same. That’s nothing though. A temporary condition, I hope [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 337, p. 18].

She also reminds Georgiev that she will need money to buy more medicine and equipment in Iran, apologizing for the imposition.

A few months after arriving in Tehran, in October, Zuleykha writes to a friend from Russia:

Dearest Natasha,

I am now a mother. I have a tiny, laughing daughter. She is so sweet and cute. I can’t wish for anything better. It’s amazing how such a great feeling appears in you for an unknown little creature. But you know this yourself. I am very happy in this room, and my daughter is my entire life. But about my husband, I know nothing. You write nothing. And I’m having no luck with work. For over four months, I’ve been home, but have not received an official license to practice medicine...

When I think of my husband, I can’t help but cry – with the war everything is unknown. Write to me what you know. Send him my letters... He would be glad to know about his daughter.

...the price of medicine is so high that you can’t even dream of getting sulfanilamide for a child. Bacteria are everywhere. I miss working in medicine, but I am busy with my daughter now. One medic I know has suggested we work together in his clinic, but I prefer to be independent even though I would like to be practicing medicine all the time. I fear for my daughter. What if she gets sick, a stomach illness, for example, or the measles? By the way, no one is afraid of that here. Many seem to be waiting for their children to get ill. It’s a dark time. They don’t know what medical care is. Everybody fears it. They place their hopes only in God [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 337, p. 11].

This letter conveys more than a young woman’s emotions and experiences. Zuleykha’s letters to the Soviet Union from Iran are macaronic texts, written in two “languages.” Back in May of that

year, while Zuleykha was still on her way home from the Soviet Union, comrade Georgiev, her handler at the IKKI, made this report for his colleagues, outlining the tasks for “comrade Asadi”:

- 1) Comrade Asadi Sharif Zuleykha is being sent to Iran... to settle in Teheran and, with our financial assistance, to open a home doctor’s office to be used in the future as a safe house.
- 2) To study the conditions in the area and search out appropriate addresses and an apartment for further work.
- 3) To select and vet individuals on site. These would preferably be women whom, after we have approved them, we can use for various assignments.
- 4) Comrade Asadi will maintain contact with us through writing. The letters will be coded.

Comrade Asadi’s code name is Mariam Sharif.

The key for Mariam Sharif is preserved, although it is likely incomplete:

local population – patients
 police – Malaria
 English intelligence – Dysentery
 German Intelligence – Measles
 Communist – medical worker (doctor, sister, paramedic)
 organization – medical literature
 Dimitrov – professor
 Iran – female illness
 Iraq – children’s illness
 India – infectious disease
 Turkey – therapy
 embassy – hospital
 safe house – walk in clinic
 helper – colleague
 ethnic minority sympathizing with us – streptocid/sulfanilamide
 reactionary elements – climatic conditions
 general mood – weather
 courier – quinine [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 337, p. 16]⁴.

Presumably to aid in memorization, the pairings are not completely random. It is noteworthy that English intelligence was codenamed dysentery. Sulfanilamide – the code word for pro-Soviet nationalities – was a new treatment being used in the war to reduce infection rates. In this language, communists are presented agents of healing.

Revisiting the end of the last letter using the key brings out its hidden layer:

...the high prices mean you can’t even dream of getting sulfanilamide for a child [it’s difficult to find Soviet sympathizers]. Bacteria are everywhere [many foreign spies]. I miss medicine [working for the party], but I am busy with my daughter now. One medic I know has suggested we work together in his clinic [local communists want to join forces], but I would rather be independent even though I’d like to be practicing medicine all the time [I want to be operating]. I fear for my daughter. What if she gets sick, a stomach illness, for example [if foreign agents come], or the measles [German intelligence]. By the way, no one is afraid of that here [German agents operate freely]. Many seem to be waiting for their children to get ill [many

⁴ One German agent in Iran was dubbed “The Pharmacist” by members of the “Light Cavalry” intelligence-gathering group led by Soviet agents Gohar and Gevork Vartanyan [Antonov, 2012, p. 158].

sympathize with the Germans]. It's a dark time. They don't know what medical care is. Everybody fears it [they are poorly informed about Communism and fear it]. They place their hopes only in God.

In light of the assessments of Zuleykha's naïveté from Soviet intelligence, the coded level of the letter does not seem to undermine the sincerity of Zuleykha's emotional words about her child and husband; the un-coded Russian does not read like a throwaway text written merely to mask the coded message, as if the latter were the letter's only true function. Zuleykha's emotional bond with the addressee, Natasha, seems real.

Yet who is Natasha? Could "Natasha" be code for Georgiev? Although Zuleykha mentions that "Natasha" also knows the joys of motherhood, that may be a detail to further throw any unwanted reader off the scent. The archives have thus far not revealed any clues.

Here is a short excerpt from another letter:

My daughter is truly amazing, so calm and beautiful. She understands a lot and laughs often, mumbling in her own language... But her mother is neither in such good spirits nor looking so well. Sometimes I feel feverish. True, I had this in Moscow also. I was told in Moscow that I had chronic malaria, but I did not believe it. [I was warned in Moscow that I would be watched by the police, but I did not believe it.] One doctor here prescribed quinine for me [one communist got me a courier]. But this doctor isn't much respected [this communist is not trustworthy]. Still, I took two doses [we met twice]. The medicine hasn't produced the desired effect yet.

An internal document marked "Top Secret" from February of 1943 shows Zuleykha's superiors back in Russia discussing funding for her activities:

Comrade Asadi, Sharif Zuleykha, whom we sent to Iran in the summer of 1942, has arrived in Teheran and taken up legal residence. She has made contact with Iranian communists and comrade Kozlov. Now she is asking how we plan to use her in our work. We have given her the task of setting up a safe house for us in Teheran. Certain funds are needed for this work, and comrade Kozlov is asking for three hundred American dollars. We consider one hundred to be enough. Please direct [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 337, p. 3].

Zuleykha's letters become increasingly insistent about support – coded as "medicine" and "books." She complains of being followed ever more closely by foreign and Iranian intelligence, and of the lack of feedback from Moscow.

Her last letter, dated March 15, 1943, begins:

Dear Natasha,

I am truly offended and even beginning to get angry with you. I fear the old saying is true: "Out of sight, out of heart." Although, I cannot be sure you are even getting my letters. You see, I have an emotional need to write to you. To share with you as we did before...

Had the Comintern abandoned her as an unpromising agent or decided she was compromised? Were the letters being intercepted? The Comintern would be dissolved two months after this letter for reasons related to the war effort, and one likely explanation for Zuleykha's sense of being left "out of sight, out of heart" is that her curating organization was already ceasing to function. Whatever the case, those were her last words preserved in the Russian archives.

The archives do, however, contain materials relating to a Zoger who seems to have been Zuleykha's husband:

Zoger worked in Medical Institute No. 205. He arrived from Iraq with a somewhat tarnished reputation as a communist having, it seems, connections to German circles. Here, he married an Armenian from Iran who had graduated from the Medical Institute and returned home to Teheran [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 216, Case 3, p. 35].

A variety of other names are listed for him: Kasim Hassan Ahmed, Al-Sheikh, Murid, and Nazim Temin. There is also an excerpt from a short autobiography by Zoger – foreign communists were always asked to write one for their case file:

I am the son of an officer in the Turkish army. My father was the only member of our family to hold any kind of rank, as the rest were workers. My father was a brigadier general on the northern front during the First Imperial War, when the British army occupied Baghdad. He died in Kurdistan, poisoned by a British agent [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 216, Case 3, p. 87].

Then there is a message from the Soviet Union to Iran about Zoger and Zuleykha:

We are sending Zoger to your country. We are redirecting him. His status and presence in the country are his personal matters. You do not need to meet with him. It has also been decided to cut the connection with his wife. She needs to be made to understand, gradually, that she must continue with her personal life and work as she wishes. There must be no contact with us, because the organization she had an agreement with has been liquidated and will no longer be carrying out any work. If she will ask for any aid, then you can give her some, but make her aware that this is the last time, because you work in a different place and cannot help her in any way now. She is able to earn money in her home country, and what's more, her husband is returning. But all of this has to be said very delicately and very politely. Find the arguments to end all interaction with her.

Put Zoger under surveillance and inform Ivan Ivanovich that he is to help you. If you should notice anything in Zoger's behavior that is compromising to us, inform us immediately.

Can you advise anything else regarding his being redirected to you?

How was his wife's arrival? We ask that you not let her know about your work and that you not give her any assignments.

May 24, 1944.

Petrov [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 216, Case 3, p. 14].

No other name is given for the author of the message, and no addressee is shown. Another document confirms that a Zoger Naim arrived in Iran in October of 1944.

Not two weeks before Petrov's letter, the Comintern, the vast hub and guidance center for communist parties around the world, had been shut down. The exhaustive cost of beating back the Nazi invasion and pressure from vital Western allies meant that the Soviets could no longer afford to support Communist activities abroad. Zealous activists and agents throughout the world were suddenly cut adrift. For many Iranian leftists, this was yet another rupture in their on-again, off-again relationship with the Soviet Union, which had chosen to work with the country's anti-Communist leader, Reza Shah, in the late 1920s and also repressed leading Iranian communists living in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s.

Yet Petrov's attitude feels unusually considerate: the instruction to inform Zuleykha "delicately and politely" that she is no longer needed. While it would be only natural for her curators to fear she might reveal secrets out of frustration, such solicitude for her emotional state stands out in an age when people were killed for trivial transgressions, hearsay, or no reason at all.

The archives have thus far yielded nothing more about Zuleykha Asadi. Shortly after the founding of the Tudeh Party in 1941, her father, Abdul Kasem, was part of a group "systematically

eased out” of the movement – largely by Akhtar Kianuri’s husband, Kambakhsh – for being “too unpredictable” [Abrahamian, 1999, p. 78]. In 1944 Abdul Kasem Asadi died [Abrahamian, 1999, p. 30].

The great revolutionary wave of the early 20th Century swept up underground activists in different ways, lifting some to dizzying heights, devouring others, and at times tossing the faithful to the shore as it churned onward.

СОКРАЩЕНИЯ / ABBREVIATIONS

ГАРФ – Государственный архив Российской Федерации [GARF – State Archive of the Russian Federation].

РГАСПИ – Российский государственный архив социально-политической истории [RGASPI – Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History].

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