Contents

CHAPTER 1

The War Year

INTRODUCTION

This chapter covers my acquaintance with Tajikistan (1990–2016), focusing on 1993 when, as the IREX resident scholar in Dushanbe, my wife and I spent a year in the city, at the time the only relatively safe place in the republic. The chapter begins with the preliminary steps that I took while looking for a suitable place in Central Asia to carry out research. For the purpose, I traveled to Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan to become acquainted with the region, and learn about the options that existed for carrying out research.

The intention of the chapter is not to provide a comprehensive study of life in Dushanbe, but to understand how middle-class Tajiks lived under war circumstances, feeding their relatively large families, coping with low, stagnant salaries and constantly rising prices. It was also important for me to gather some facts about pre-Soviet Tajikistan in order to assess the impact of Soviet rule on Muslim Tajiks, an impact that over the decades had led to civil war.[1]

The chapter ends with my general thoughts about Tajikistan, the result of twelve trips I have made to work with Tajik academicians, colleagues, and friends, my supporters for nearly thirty years. I stayed abreast of the developments in the republic in order to follow the careers of people who were popular in 1993 but followed different paths soon after. More importantly, I wanted to assess the lives of those who made a difference through their own thoughts and assertions. Only then, I thought, would I be able to present the extent of their involvement, the amount of their contribution, and their strengths and weaknesses.

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1 Cf. Asliddin Sohibnazar, *Subhi Sitorakush* (Dushanbe: Donish, 1997), 29.

THE PREPARATION

My acquaintance with the Tajiki language began in Ann Arbor in 1967 when I took a course on linguistic typology. I learned that Tajiki was an Indo-European language like the Persian of Iran. I also learned that it was spoken in one of the republics of the Soviet Union that at the time was behind the iron curtain. The first time I heard Tajiki and talked to actual Tajiks was in 1989 when movie director Marvorid Kosimova brought her movie *Rohi Sapid* to Minneapolis for screening.[2] The theme of the movie was a gentle goodbye to both Tajikistan's traditional culture and to the moribund Soviet state.

Over a cup of coffee, Ms. Kosimova asked me if the Ministry of Education of Tajikistan were to invite me to Tajikistan for a short visit, would I consider traveling to Dushanbe. I said that I would. In subsequent months, her assistant, Vosse, kept in touch with me and, eventually, an invitation arrived. Extremely interested to see that part of the world, I began preparation for the trip. I also tried to learn as much as possible about the little known republic of Tajikistan. My most memorable recollection of Dushanbe at that time was the following description of the Varzob gorge:

> A sea of green among the highlands that have given birth to the Iranian race; where the Persian language is in its purest form and where tall Tajik men court gazelle-eyed beauties carrying jugs of water on their shoulders from the purest springs; the home of Rustam in the neighborhood of the legendary castle of Afrasiyab.

Oddly enough, at the time, I was involved in a study of Ferdowsi's *Shahname* (book of kings), looking for elements that could distinguish the Central Asian Turks from the descendants of the legendary warrior prince, Tur. In any event, I decided to undertake the trip for three reasons. First, I had branched out of Iranian studies into Central Asian studies where I intended to develop courses that informed the students about events in Soviet Central Asia through hands-on research and observation. In that context, I wanted to examine the status of Islam in Central Asia after seventy years of conflict with communist ideology. Second, I had written a novella called the *Black Tulip*. Between Kosimova's visit and the coming of the invitation, Vosse had translated the Persian version of the

2 *Rohi Sapid* (lit. "white road") means "bon voyage." It is said to a person who is embarking on a long journey.

novella into Tajiki, but the censors would not allow its publication. The publishers thought my presence in Dushanbe might give them leverage to publish it. Third, I was looking for a place outside the Islamic Republic of Iran to continue my study of developments in Iranian identity. Tajikistan seemed an ideal place for that.

I found the Tajiks to be extremely kind. They had not had much contact with people from the West, so both they and I were experiencing a new encounter. Although the Ministry had invited me only to participate in the Borbad celebration, soon after arrival I was separated from my colleagues who were going to conference venues. Instead, I was taken to Varzob and Hisor, the beautiful places that I had read about. I was worried, however, that I was not present at the meetings that I thought I should be attending. Saif Rahim explained. "Ustod,"[3] he said. "Technically you are invited by the Ministry of Education to participate in the Borbad celebration. But in reality the Ministry invited you at the request of Kinostudio, our organization. So, we thought we should be the ones to set the agenda for your visit." I was not aware of that arrangement.

It turned out that during the last couple of decades, with the help of Davlat Khudonazarov and before that, with the assistance of Bentsiion Arievich Kimiiagarov, the studio had produced a series of films based on the stories in the *Shahname*. They wanted to bring those productions to the world market, and they thought I might be able to help in that.

After a meeting with Davlat Khudonazarov and others to secure funds for dubbing the films into English, or adding subtitles as required, my work with the group ended for the time being. Thereafter, I joined my colleagues and presented my scheduled paper on the "Role of the *Farr* in Ferdowsi's *Shahname*." Furthermore, I was informed by the Academy that, in 1994, they intended to present my study entitled *Ferdowsi's Shahname: 1000 Years After* at the forthcoming international congress on "The *Shahname* and Our Time."[4]

Before leaving Tajikistan, at the airport, an old man approached me and asked me if I was Dr. Iraj Bashiri. I said I was. He introduced himself as Albert Khoromov.[5] I did not know the name. When he asked, why I have come to

3 The term *ustod* means master, teacher, or professor. Here it is used as an honorific term establishing scholarly status for a guest.

4 Muhammad Osimi wrote "The Boundless Sea of Spirituality," in *Firdowsi's Shahname: 1000 Years After*, ed. and trans. Iraj Bashiri (Dushanbe: Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan, 1994), xxi, as an introduction to the volume.

5 Iraj Bashiri, *Prominent Tajik Figures of the Twentieth Century* (Dushanbe: Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2002), 163–164.

Tajikistan, I said, "I am here for the Borbad festival and am increasingly attracted to Sadriddin Aini and the revolution. I might come back to study Aini's works."

"But I know you as a linguist, not a historian."

"Before I was in linguistics," I said, "I was in literature. We live only once. During the past seventy years, something extremely significant happened here. I want to understand that. And I have a feeling that Aini can help me do that."

"There is definitely something here to understand, but it is not the revolution."

"What is it then?" I asked, out of curiosity.

"Yaghnob," he said. "Be the first to tell Americans about the people of Yaghnob."[6]

"Like what?"

"Like they look at your face and tell you what kind of a person you are. If you have a large mouth, they say you are clever; if you have a small mouth, you are shy and cowardly; if you have small teeth, you are a tightwad; and if your teeth are set far apart, you are a womanizer …"

"So, it seems that when you talk to them they scan your face?"

"They do," he agreed. "If you have a long head, they consider you a liar; a round head, a rude person; and a large head, you are generous and wise."

"I guess," I said jokingly, "all that is left out are the ears!"

"No, they are not left out," he said. "If you have large ears, you are a fraud …"

Later, in 1993, I learned that Professor Khoromov passed away. He really did his best to focus my efforts on the people of Yaghnob, instead of on Tajiks as a whole, and he was quite persuasive. He even offered me a room in his house where I could stay and work with him on Yaghnob. Over the years I have learned how much he loved the Yaghnobis. In his honor, I wrote a short account on the Yaghnobis, their migration, and their language, but that was not what he was asking for.

Back at the time, I returned from Tajikistan to Minneapolis with a buoyant air of accomplishment. After over twenty years of teaching about Samarqand and Bukhara without access to those ancient sources of cultural identity, there was an opportunity now to learn about them firsthand. The Tajiks, both in Kinostudio and at the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, met me with open arms, took me sightseeing, and suggested programs of cooperation. It was up to me now to decide what the next twenty years of my career should look like.

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6 For more information on the beliefs and customs of the Yaghnobis, see Taghoimurod Yorzoda, *Bavarha va Ta'birati Mardumi dar Zaboni Yaghnabi* (Dushanbe: Payvand, 2010).

I did not want to devote all my time to Tajikistan simply because of a visit. The other Central Asian republics, especially Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were similarly interesting and, potentially, more fruitful for scholarship. A good part of the history of medieval Iran, all the way to the nineteenth century, was tied to the area. More importantly, the city of Samarqand that I had recently toured and the city of Bukhara that was still not ready to be presented to tourists, were now in Uzbekistan. I continued studying the region while keeping an eye on the events in the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. Momentous events were reshaping lives in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia.

Sometime in 1991, I had a visitor who introduced himself as Erlan Sagadiev, son of the president of the Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan. He asked if I had some time to talk to him about Central Asia. I said, talking about Central Asia was my job, and added that my guest seemed himself to come from those parts.

I was correct: Sagadiev came from Kazakhstan, one of the republics that had recently gained their independence from the former Soviet Union. He traveled to the United States because he wanted to talk to scholars dealing with the region and explain a project that the Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan was considering to launch. He wanted to see if I would be interested in contributing to the project.

I said I was already working on a project with the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, but I would be glad to listen to his project as well. It consisted of spending the summer of 1992 in Alma-Ata (now Almaty) as the guest of the Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan and writing an overview about life in the newly independent republic, covering its history, literature, and culture. The article was going to be an informative and unbiased piece about the republic and present Kazakhstan the way it was. Travel expenses were not covered, he said, but everything else for my stay would be provided by the Academy. I told the young man that the project was reasonable and that I would give it some thought before deciding whether it fit my future plans.

The idea of writing about a republic I did not really know was intriguing. There were six Muslim republics all undergoing the same processes. More importantly, each of those republics presented a different set of issues and could give a different array of experiences. Would it not be great to write overviews about all of them and introduce them in the manner that the young man had put it, in an informative and even-handed way.

Sagadiev was persuasive and urged me to give the matter due consideration. Eventually, I decided that Kazakhstan was the largest and richest of the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union. Spending a summer there and

learning about Kazakh life might be exactly what I needed to do at that juncture in my career. At the least, it would provide a point of contrast to any of the other republics on which I might choose to concentrate.

I accepted the project. It was decided that the Academy would send my wife and me invitations, and we would fly to Almaty on our own. Before leaving Minneapolis, I would let them know the itinerary. For continuity, however, suffice it to say that we arrived in Almaty and found temporary lodgings in the Alatoo hotel. I was informed that the president of the Academy wanted to see me as soon as possible.

The day that had started with arrival and accommodation in Alatoo ended quite differently than expected. Late in the afternoon, we left the hotel and went to the bazaar, where we asked for the way to the mosque. Most passersby either were unaware that the mosque was nearby or simply said they did not know. We decided to look for the mosque the next day. On the way to the hotel we stopped at a *yurta* and bought some rice and kabob for dinner.[7] After eating, I felt sick. First we thought it would pass, but it got worse. I remember my wife Carol sitting on the bed saying, "What happens if something happens to you? I don't know anyone here," and I said, "This has happened before. Don't worry." It was most likely a reaction to something in the food, we never found out, what exactly. But it passed.

The guide that was assigned to me helped me register at the entrance to the Academy. We then walked up two flights of stairs, past a large, white statue of Lenin, and through two beautifully carpeted halls and decorated walls. At the end of the corridor, the guide knocked on an exquisitely wrought mahogany door, ushered me into a large office, and remained behind the door. President Sagadiev met me in the middle of his office, shook my hand, and motioned to some chairs near a table, where we talked about my trip from Minneapolis, life in the United States, the University of Minnesota where I worked, my scholarly contributions, teaching, and publications. I answered all his questions and gave him some of my books that I had brought with me for the purpose.

At the end of the meeting, the president said something that intrigued me. Never before had I been asked a question like that. "There is a custom in Kazakhstan," he said, "to ask the guest a particular question. Can I ask you that question?" "By all means," I said. "Please go ahead and ask." "Is there a single thing," he asked, "that the Academy could do for you to make your trip memorable? If there is, this is your chance to make it happen!"

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7 *Yurt* or *yurta* is a round tent that can be pitched within a short time.

As I said, this was an intriguing question—something that a genie in an Arabian Nights story would ask. What could I ask for? More practically, what was there to ask for? Then, without thinking what I was saying, I blurted out, "You have invited me to Kazakhstan to learn about Kazakh history and culture and to write about it. Is it possible to show me Kazakh life before it was changed by the Russians and the Soviets?"

The president sat back, looked at me intently, and told me I was asking for the impossible. That life came to an end seventy years ago. Now the Kazakhs were settled people. No one lived in *yurtas* the way their forefathers did, not any more.

I felt somewhat uncomfortable for having said what came to my head without restraint and was about to apologize. However, I stopped myself. I was a foreigner trying to understand their culture. How else was I going to learn their ways! A hush fell on our conversation. He got up, went to his working desk, and dialed a number, all the time drumming with his fingers on the desk as he waited. It took some time before a connection was made. He talked to someone in Kazakh and returned to the table with a smile. "It seems like something can be arranged," he said. "They will let you know when. Meanwhile, have a good time in Almaty and learn about our history and culture. We seem to have been left out of things for too long."

After I returned from the Academy, Carol and I talked about the meeting and we decided to put some time aside every day in case there was a meeting or a party or something dealing with old Kazakh ways. But nothing of the sort happened. Days went by and I fell into the routine of going to the Academy and talking to various *cadres* (officials) who dealt with educational efforts of the Academy and their contributions to the improvement of Kazakh society and its global elevation.

Working with the Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan and becoming familiar with its many branches, especially learning about the many exciting projects of the Kazakh scholars, was much more interesting and informative than I had expected. My objective, of course, was to see if there was enough substance in what I saw that could sustain my research for at least the next twenty or thirty years.

In search of an answer to that question, I asked for information on people who had made a difference in shaping the Kazakh identity. In that regard, I studied Abai Kunanbayev's life[8] and his volumes, *Abai's Way*, edited by

8 Iraj Bashiri, "Abai Kunanbayev," in *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century*, ed. Steven Serafin, 3rd ed. (Detroit: St. James Press, 1999), 677–678.

Mukhtar Auezov. I looked into the works of Chokan Valikhanov, and visited the institute dedicated to Jambul Jabayev.[9] I also visited the *Muftiyyot* of Kazakhstan and talked to the Mufti about the state of Islam in the republic. Everything was going smoothly and I was learning a lot, but still I saw no arrangements to show me Kazakh life as it had been in pre-Soviet times.

Then, one morning, with just a few days left before our departure for Minneapolis, out of the blue, two cars pulled up in front of the apartment and we were told that the Academy had arranged for us to spend these last several days in the village of Shiyen. Several families in Shiyen had agreed to take time off and show us the old ways of life in Kazakhstan. The very thing I had asked for!

One of three men, who were waiting for us by the cars told me that he was Iskandar Bek, my interpreter. The other two men were older than Iskandar Bek. One was introduced as Apsamat from the Department of Philosophy, the other as Joltas Khan from the Department of Journalism. Later, from the way they were received in Shiyen, I learned that they both were not only experienced scholars, but also from among the trusted friends of the president. Soon after this brief introduction, the cars headed east and, before long, left Almaty, moving along the foothills of the Alatoo range. The road was good. In the distance, on the body of Alatoo that resembled a sleeping panther, there were some irregular lines drawn up and down. I asked for an explanation. I was told that those were trails used by herders as they move their herds of horses in search of good grazing land. Also, they said, Issyk Kul is right across from where we were, only on the other side of the mountain. "You mean we could go on horseback from here to Issyk Kul in Kyrgyzstan?" I asked. "You surely can," was the answer.

On the way, Iskandar Bek briefly described our host family in Shiyen. Until not long ago this family had lived a nomadic life. Now they were settled. Their son still took the horses up the mountain for six months and stayed up there with them for the duration. The family was in charge of several milk stations located on the mountainside near the village.

In Shiyen, the cars were parked next to a light gray metal wall. A wide, blue metal gate opened and a smiling young Kazakh lady stepped out and greeted us in English with a pleasant British accent. Her name was Altin Kiz (translated as "golden girl"). Iskandar Bek had mentioned her name but had not said that she spoke English. I was surprised and delighted at the same time. It was wonderful, I thought, especially that Carol now had someone to talk to.

9 For information on Auezov, Valikhonov, and Jabayev see Glossary.

In the yard, we ritually washed our hands at a tap and dried them with towels offered by the host. We were then ushered into a room with a long table in the middle and chairs arranged as if for a seminar. Iskandar Bek explained that in the old days you would sit on the floor with a pillow supporting your back. I was about to sit somewhere in the middle of table, but they did not let me. Even though I was not the oldest male, I was asked to sit at the head of the table, in the place of honor farthest from the door. Carol was seated to my left and Joltas Khan to my right. Iskandar Bek, who needed to be close to me to interpret, was placed next to Carol. Apsamat was next to Joltas Khan. The host sat next to him. The older ladies in the family, who were allowed to participate, were at the far end of the table attending to the tea. First I thought this was a casual arrangement but, in time, I learned that it was traditional for family and guests to sit in this way when a guest of honor visited

With the first round of tea, Joltas Khan began telling legends about the lives of Kazakh *batirs* (heroes), enumerating the exploits of many men and women who contributed to the shaping of the Kazakh nation. Every now and then Iskandar Bek translated the important parts of the narrative but, in general, he just told me Joltas Khan was recalling the deeds of the ancestors: *batirs*, *beys* (noble men), and *biis* (judges) well known throughout Central Asia. He systematically enumerated the exploits of each group and moved on to the next. That, Iskandar Bek explained, is how Kazakhs kept a record of their history. For me the whole narration was fascinating. But as hard as I tried, I could not provide a satisfactory context in which I could place those wonderful thoughts and keep them in my memory. I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information, all of it passed down orally by generations of Kazakhs to each other.

After about two hours or so, there was a break. We left the room to stretch our legs and take some fresh air. In the yard, ladies were preparing lunch and children were playing next to them. Their working tables were in a line, and each lady had a particular task. The first one made the dough, rolled it out and cut it into the right sizes. The next one flattened it on the back of a very large tray and cut it into concentric circles beginning on the outside. The third lady cut the circles into specific lengths and folded them into a particular pattern. When enough shapes were ready, she took them to the cook who sat near a vat of very hot oil over an open fire pit. The cook put the cakes in the vat and watched them cook on one side then turned them over and browned them on the other side. At the end, she removed them and placed them on a tray covered with paper.

At about 1:00 pm the main part of the lunch was placed on the table. When we returned to the room, everyone sat in their previous places. After the host said grace, which consisted of just a few words, including *Allahu Akbar* ("God is great"), and running the palms over the face, we began eating. The absence of vegetables and fruits was noteworthy. Tea was served with generous amounts of sugar and milk fresh from the cow. There was more milk than tea, but it was delicious.

After lunch, the morning routine was repeated. This time, Apsamat talked about al-Farabi and his contributions to medicine, philosophy, and music. He emphasized the Kazakh government's plan to create a medical university in the name of the sage and staff it with an international team of physicians and nurses. He also told us that, once back in Almaty, he planned take us to a particular museum where we could see all types of musical instruments, including the *qopuz*[10] and large war drums. There, we would listen to reproductions of the sounds of all those instruments as if we were in a *tuy* (festive gathering) or in the battle field. At the end, he played the *qopuz* and sang a beautiful Kazakh ditty for us.

During the break, in private, Altin Kiz talked informally about her life in the village. She had studied English on her own and was genuinely attracted to Shakespeare's plays. More than anything, she was interested in Stratford-Upon-Avon and the Old Vic. Fortunately, as an undergraduate student, I had majored in English literature and studied Shakespeare under British professors at Pahlavi University in Shiraz, Iran, and later at the University of Liverpool. I happily shared with her the information I had. Her real predicament, however, was something else. She was married to a young herder, who spoke neither Russian nor English, and even could not speak Kazakh well. Consequently, she had no one to relate to and spent most of her time with her children, educating them in the best way possible under Shiyen circumstances.

I also got into a conversation with Iskandar Bek. His English was very good. Unlike Joltas Khan, was politically conservative. He did not say quite what his standing at the Academy was, but it was obvious that he had the respect of President Sagadiev. Our conversation was interrupted by the host who burst in through the front gate carrying a sheep. "He is going to kill that sheep in your honor," Iskandar Bek said to me as the host walked by. I was taken aback. "No," I said, "that can't be. I won't allow it." "You have nothing to say about it," Iskandar Bek said. "What do you mean?" I asked. "You said it is in my honor. What if I don't want a poor animal to be killed for me?"

10 *Qopuz* is a fretless string instrument used by the Kazakh and Kyrgyz people.

Iskandar Bek looked puzzled. Then in a calm and collected manner he said: "You claim that you don't want to accept the sacrifice. Fine. But do you remember what your one request from the president was? Now, this butchering is the custom here. Forty households in Shiyen have been asked to host you each day until your tour as a guest of honor is over and you become a regular member of the community. Each family is going to kill a sheep in your honor. Are you planning to refuse to accept those offers, too?" I had no more to say. Iskandar Bek said, "Then let us go and watch." We walked to the back of the house, stood in front of the barn and watched the poor creature butchered. Carol, with our bulky video camera, documented the event.

Late in the afternoon, we were taken to the village cemetery. It was on a small hill a couple of blocks from the house. In fact, most of the cemeteries in the area that we passed during the visit were located on top of hills. A number of Kazakh youth, the casualties of the Soviet-Afghan war, were buried on that hill.

Unlike the houses in Almaty, the houses on both sides of the main road in Shiyen did not have an air of permanence. Some of them had *yurtas* set up in the backyard, very much like garages. Here and there, more solid structures were being built.

The landlord had stayed back to singe the sheep's head and prepare it to be cooked for dinner. When we returned, he was about done with the singeing. He showed Carol and me to our room, where we stayed until about eight o'clock. Then the meeting began. This time I answered their questions about life in the United States, mostly about jobs, salaries, best places to live, the weather, and the like. Dinner, we were told, was served at midnight.

While we were waiting, they began playing a game that could best be called an "ancestor's game." Everybody in the circle had to name as many members on his family tree as he could. Every Kazakh, I was told, must remember the names of at least seven ancestors. For some, it seemed, the game was easy and joyful. For some others, the younger generation in particular, it was not. Some could not go beyond the third or fourth generation. That made them embarrassed, frustrated, and at times abusive.

At about 11:30, trays of food were brought in and placed in pre-determined places on the long table. Most of the food was the same fried cakes that were prepared in the morning. This time, however, there were trays of tomatoes, cucumbers, parsley, and other greens grown in their garden. There were also trays and plates full of meat, ostensibly from the sheep killed in the afternoon, with noodles around the edges. At the end, a special tray was brought in. On it, in the middle, was the singed head of the sheep that I had tried to save. The tray

was placed directly in front of me, with the eyes in the head looking me directly in the eyes.

I sat back and uncomfortably adjusted the tray. The host asked Apsamat to welcome us to his house on his behalf. Others, too, chimed in. I, in, turn thanked them for giving us the opportunity to visit their home, especially for going out of their way to recreate the old Kazakh way of life for us to see. Then I moved to fill my plate. Iskandar Bek drew my attention to himself. When I looked at him, he said, "Professor, it is your job as the guest of honor to divide the parts of the head among the guests. Before that, however," he added, "put your finger in the right eye socket, pull the eye out, and eat it." Even though Iskandar Bek's gestures were quite expressive, I was not sure that I heard him right. "What?" I said. He repeated the same thing. I felt overwhelmed. The stress made my left hand shake visibly. Whenever I see the video that Carol made of the occasion, I am filled with amazement.

"Why don't you ask Joltas Khan to do that?" I asked. "He is the oldest." Iskandar Bek said firmly, "He may be the oldest, but he is not the guest of honor." Then without letting me add a word, he added, "Professor, I know this came as a surprise, but consider the case. This family has undergone a lot, doing things that they no longer do in their routine life to recreate a world that no longer exists. …" "All right," I said. "It is the way of the land." "Yes," he said, "it is the way of the land."

Then, without thinking about what I actually was doing, I thrust my finger in the eye socket, took the eye out and placed it in my mouth. It did not have a distinct taste, but felt like chewing on an olive. Iskandar Bek then calmly said, "Now cut the left ear and place it on your wife's plate." I did that. "Now," he continued, "cut the skin on the head and divide it among the people around the table according to how much you like each. …"

THE PATH FORWARD

The trips to Tajikistan and Kazakhstan gave me an opportunity to review my activities of the past couple of decades and draw up a plan for my future. Twenty years of work on Iranian studies had provided me with a foundation in Iranian linguistics, literature, history, and culture. But I expected more. For instance, reading about Abai Kunanbayev of Kazakhstan had opened a new road before me. I wanted to know more about him, his tribe, his links with the Russian culture, and a whole host of other subjects. What motivated Abai to take on a task like familiarizing the Kazakh nation with European ways? However, that was

only one side of the issue. The other side was my connection with Kazakh culture. How could I relate to the joys and sorrows, especially the aspirations of the protagonists in Abai's world? I recalled the morning in Shiyen when Joltas Khan enumerated the exploits of Kazakh *batirs*, *biis*, and *beys*. I could not know how long it would take me to adjust my Turkish and speak the Kazakh language properly so that I could hold a meaningful conversation with Joltas Khan about the brave sons of Kazakhstan of whom he was so proud.

Similarly, Chingiz Aitmatov from Kyrgyzstan showed lives absolutely unknown to me. His characters, Muslims, atheists, and communists, were unforgettable. They, too, belonged to a world that was extremely attractive for me. Yet I had difficulty relating to them as well. More exactly, I could not identify with them. They, too, belonged to a world that I felt comfortable to visit, but not a world in which I wanted to live.

The review, eventually, brought me back to Tajikistan and the life of Sadriddin Aini. Aini was the type of individual with whom I could walk down the back alleys of Samarqand and Bukhara, chat over a *piyolai choi* (cup of tea) in a *choikhona* (teahouse) in Dushanbe, and exchange ideas about *madrasas* (theological school) in Isfahan. My world gravitated to his world, as it had gravitated before to the worlds of poets and intellectuals such as 'Umar Khayyam, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Shams al-Din Hafiz, Muslih al-Din Sa'di, and Sadeq Hedayat. Aini's experiences, I thought, would be able to do for me what Abai and Aitmatov's stories could not. They could show me a way forward, helping me to uncover the layers that had obscured my vision of my own identity.

Finally, I decided that I would dedicate a good portion of my life to the study of the Tajiks, concentrating on two things. First, I wanted to understand the dynamics of their struggle with communism. Second, I wished to know more about their unending struggle to maintain their identity in the face of centuries-long assault by Arab invaders propagating Islam. This complemented well my efforts to study Iranian identity by investigating all its facets including cosmology, mythology, and history.

With this new vision, I prepared a proposal and submitted it to The International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) for funding. I requested a one-year stipend so that I could carry out preliminary research to understand the process usually referred to as Sovietization. Once the application was accepted, Carol and I began preparation for the year-long trip before heading for Tajikistan.

The preparation for going to Tajikistan for a year took some time. Being there for ten days as a guest was different from moving there to stay for a year. Besides, on that trip I was alone, but now Carol was accompanying me. The

difference between living alone and living as a family had to be considered. For instance, we had to decide whether we should live in the "American" part of Dushanbe where there were supermarkets, continuous electricity, water, and comfortable furnished housing, or in the less affluent part of town where, in addition to possible lack of these amenities, there was a glaring lack of security to worry about. After looking at all those factors and the fact that I was interested in seeing the interactions between the Muslim Tajiks, Soviet (that is, communist and atheist) Tajiks, and non-ethnic Tajiks, we decided that we should live in the city but away from the "American" section.

With all that figured out, we set about preparing the things we thought we will need to sustain us for a fortnight, while we were getting our bearings and getting used to the climate and the food. There were some things that were difficult to find in Dushanbe at the time. Those included things like powdered milk, toothpaste, toothbrush, shampoo, and the like. In general, we had to think about things that usually do not come to mind first. Then, there were gifts. I did not know many people there, but my understanding was that, generally, even acquaintances expected gifts, especially from visitors coming from the United States.

Those days, travel from Minneapolis to Dushanbe was not as easy as it is today or as it has been during the last couple of decades. From Minneapolis, we went to New York, from New York to Frankfurt and from there to Moscow. In Moscow, we went from the international airport (Sheremet'evo) to the provincial airport (Domodedovo). Eventually, we arrived in Almaty, and had to find our own way to Dushanbe.

Our travel to Almaty on the whole went without any problems, except an unusually long delay in the airport in Aktau, a small town in Kazakhstan, on the east bank of the Caspian Sea. When flying over the Caspian, for a few seconds, it felt like the plane was pulled up momentarily and released. Then it became steady until it landed at Aktau.

When our stay in Aktau took longer than expected, passengers became inquisitive. It was cold and uncomfortable, because the airport was not equipped for a large number of people. It turned out that the airplane that had brought us to Aktau had a malfunction and would not continue on to Almaty. A different plane, we were told, was on the way from Almaty to complete the trip but would take about three hours. When boarding the new plane, we saw that a good part of the tail of the disabled plane was missing.

From Almaty we took the bus to Bishkek. In Bishkek, with the help of Vosse in Dushanbe and the Academy of Sciences of Kyrgyzstan we got visas

for Tajikistan. For whatever reason, the visa specified that we should travel from Bishkek to Charjou, in Turkmenistan, and from there to Dushanbe. We therefore went to the Manas Airport, some distance from Bishkek, and bought two Bishkek-Charju-Dushanbe tickets. Then, at the hotel, I called Vosse to let him know the itinerary. He agreed to meet us at the airport. Then, a while later, Vosse called back and asked whether we had booked two Bishkek-Charju-Dushanbe tickets. Vosse was sure there was no such thing as a Charju-Dushanbe flight! Just to be on the safe side, he asked us to go to Manas airport and verify that there was a flight.

At the airport, the girl who had sold me the tickets said, "Sir, you asked for two tickets with that specification and I gave you two tickets. Now you are saying there is no flight. That is a different issue. You need to talk with the manager about that." I looked for the manager, who was nowhere to be found. When he appeared at last, he repeated the same line, as if I was at fault asking for that particular ticket.

After a lot of back-and-forth with the airport authorities, they returned half the price of the tickets. The rest, they said, had already been spent. Since there was no direct flight to Dushanbe, the next option was taking the bus to Khujand with a changeover in Tashkent. The difficulty was that we could not buy bus tickets with our American passports. Out of necessity, I called a friend I knew at the Academy of Sciences of Kyrgyzstan. She bought two bus tickets for us. I knew that the problem with buying bus tickets will come up again in Tashkent, but I kept it to myself.

The trip to Tashkent took twelve hours, including half an hour for fixing a puncture. We arrived in Tashkent at 6:00 am. The next bus was at eight o'clock. I asked Carol to stay with the luggage and went to buy two tickets for Khujand. The ticket seller asked for identification. I gave him our passports. He looked them over and said, "I don't see a visa for Uzbekistan." "As you can see," I explained, "we have Bishkek-Charjou-Dushanbe visas. But we found out that there is no flight from Charjou to Dushanbe. We found that out only yesterday. Therefore, we had to buy bus tickets for Tashkent." The man insisted on the visa. He handed the passports back to me and instructed us to wait until the offices opened at 8 am. The government authorities would come and decide what we needed to do. We told him that we were not planning on staying in Tashkent, we were in transit. If we could get the tickets, we would just get on the Khujand bus. He did not react.

All that time, another man in the room was listening to us, but was not a part of the conversation. Seeing my despair, he joined the conversation.

Addressing the ticket-seller, he said, "Remember, we did not have this visa business until recently. So people haven't got used to it yet. He (pointing to me) is a guest. Give him the tickets."

Then he took me to the corner of the room and said, "If the authorities get involved, this can become complicated. Give the man something for his kindness and get your tickets." I agreed to give the ticket-seller a small amount of dollars, took the tickets, thanked both men for their help, and joined Carol in the yard. Passengers for the Khujand bus were already gathering under the "Khujand" sign. Unlike the Bishkek-Tashkent bus, this was a smaller bus but not as crowded. We took two seats in the middle. Next to me across the aisle was a young man. He was talking with two others, who were sitting right behind him, about their experiences in Russia. I was glad that the problems in Tashkent did not prevent us from getting on this bus. The trip was not supposed to be long and the countryside was beautiful.

Near Khujand, the bus was stopped for inspection. An officer boarded the bus and walked all the way to the end of the bus, observing the passengers. On his way back, he tapped me on the shoulder and told me to follow him. Outside the bus, he walked towards the luggage compartment that was already open and stood there. A couple of soldiers carrying guns stood at a distance. A couple of others were inspecting the passengers' luggage. The officer asked me to identify my luggage. I pointed to one of the suitcases and, following his direction, opened it. He inspected the contents very carefully and told the conductor it could be returned to its place.

I thought the inspection was completed and I could go ahead and board. But the officer said he was not done with me yet. Then, looking me intensely in the eyes, he asked, why I was going to Tajikistan.

I said, "I am a scholar doing research on the works of Sadriddin Aini."

"Why in Tajikistan at this time? You know there is a war going on in Tajikistan?"

"I am aware of it," I said. "But I have nothing to do with the war. I am planning to stay in Dushanbe. And the books I need are found only in Tajikistan."

"You have not chosen a good time," he said. "Good luck. You can board."

On the bus, the young men were curious about what the officer wanted. I told them he wanted to know why I am going to Tajikistan.

"Why are you going to Tajikistan?" One of the two sitting in the back asked.

"I'm going to Dushanbe to carry out research on the works of Sadriddin Aini."