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ARCHIVAL REPORT

Drifting toward Revolution: Kurt Scharf and the *dah shab* in Tehran

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Poetry readings are an intimate affair; they are not suitable for mobilizing the masses. But poems can capture moods and trigger emotions. They can create closeness and community, send messages and demand change. Indeed, in the case of Iran, a series of poetry reading sessions can be considered a milestone event on the country's path toward revolution.[2] During ten nights of poetry reading, known as the *dah shab*, in October 1977 in Tehran, the country's most prominent poets and writers took advantage of a short window of opportunity that opened up for them when the Shah loosened somewhat the reins of dictatorship. Beginning on October 10, 1977, they presented their poems to thousands of listeners on ten consecutive evenings on the premises of the German-Iranian Cultural Association on Pahlavī Avenue. Poets of all political persuasions were present, united above all in their common interest of demanding an end to censorship and standing up for freedom of speech. The impressive list of participants includes such well-known names as Behazin, Simin Behbehani, Mehdi Akhavan-Sales, Houshang Golshiri, Saeed Soltanpour, and Siavosh Kasrai, along with many more.[3]

The *dah shab* were organized by the Writers' Association of Iran, the *Kānūn-e Nevīsandegān-e Īrān* (KNI), which had been founded in April 1968 but was forced to go underground after repression of writers and intellectuals increased in 1970.[4] In 1977, however, the association reappeared on the scene and once again became actively involved in the political and social debates in the country. The sudden reappearance of the KNI can be explained in the context of the election victory of Jimmy Carter (US president 1977–1981), who tied his foreign policy to conditions such as respect for human rights in partner countries. These demands left an impact on the Shah, who "put an end to the worst excesses in the prisons [and] tolerated a few manifestations of malcontent by intellectuals," as Chehabi puts it.[5] In this atmosphere, when an inkling of change was in the air but no one had the word "revolution" on their lips yet, the revived Writers' Association was looking for a partner to organize poetry readings. Preferably, this partner would offer a space that allowed a little more

[1] Interview of Kurt Scharf (KS) by interviewer Olmo Gölz (OG). The interview was originally conducted May 14, 2012. The translation into English was reviewed by Kurt Scharf and authorized by him on September 15, 2020.

[2] On the significance of the *dah shab* as a revolutionary moment, see Olmo Gölz, "Ten Revolutionary Nights."

[3] Gölz, "Dah Šab," 96–107.

[4] For a thorough history of the Writers' Association see Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "Protest and Perish," 189–229; and Sepānlū, *Sargozasht-e Kānūn-e Nevīsandegān-e Īrān*.

[5] Chehabi, *Iranian Politics*, 226.

freedom than the habitual, so that participants would feel at ease to address the topics of censorship and freedom of expression more openly.[6]

They found this partner in the German Goethe-Institut, which could offer writers and poets the modest protection of a foreign cultural institute.[7] Therefore, the journalist and writer Jalal Sarfaraz contacted an employee at the Goethe-Institut in Tehran, Kurt Scharf. Scharf was the deputy director of the institute from March 1973 until August 1979, and, with his keen interest in Persian literature, he was certainly the right person to talk to. Scharf's love of Iranian poetry also led him, many years later, to excel as a translator of Persian poetry into German.[8] Back then, it was he who convinced the director of the institute to consider the KNI's plans, which were eventually implemented. Kurt Scharf's memories of the organization and realization of the *dah shab* are the subject of the extensive interview I conducted with him.

The interview may help not only to better understand the genesis of the event, but also to clear up some misconceptions that relate in particular to the last evening. Several accounts claim that security forces broke up the last evening by force. This is not correct, as Kurt Scharf makes clear (and as I also have documented elsewhere[9]). The confusion stems from a mix-up with another, later series of poetry readings at the Āryāmehr University that copied the *dah shab*. This nevertheless demonstrates the significance of the ten nights organized by the KNI and the Goethe-Institut for Iran's path to revolution: obviously, the regime did not want a repetition of this publicly displayed courage in the articulation of oppositional thought. For both the KNI and the responsible persons at the Goethe-Institut, it was a political decision to organize poetry reading sessions together from the very beginning. However, that Iran was drifting toward revolution or that the *dah shab* set a ball into motion was certainly not clear to the actors of the hour. As Scharf reports, in the historical moment itself, the magnitude of the event became clear for the first time only a few days before the opening of the poetry evenings, when everyone involved realized that the institute's premises were too small to accommodate the large number of listeners that were expected. Consequently, the organizers decided to move the event to the huge garden of the German-Iranian Cultural Association.

Conceptually, the *dah shab* were organized in such a way that each evening opened with one or two speeches by a writer, and subsequently between three and six poets would recite their poems or other speeches.[10] In total, fifty-seven poets and writers presented their works over the ten evenings, each evening moderated by colleagues from the KNI. Even Kurt Scharf himself had to take to the microphone at one point: on the sixth evening, the Goethe-Institut felt compelled to ask for moderation and for participants to abide by the agreement not to provoke the regime, after the mood had become truly revolutionary the night before, when Saeed Soltanpour unabashedly expressed his anger at the regime and Baqer Momeni gave a lecture entitled "Censorship and Its Consequences".[11]

The employees of the Goethe-Institut feared the consequences of such open criticism, but the security forces held back, and the mood calmed down somewhat on the following evenings, although the poets and writers continued to formulate their demands, either openly or in a more covert manner. It was Golshiri who, in his farewell speech on October 19, asked those present to go home and remain calm and do nothing "until we have spread out our feathered wings, until we have become a great forest."[12] Scharf remembers that Golshiri struck a chord, as everyone was concerned "about what happens when you can speak almost

[6] Sā'edī, Iranian Oral History Project.

[7] On the role of the Goethe-Institut in Iran see Chehabi, "Goethe Institute."

[8] Scharf, *Halt aus in der Nacht bis zum Wein*; Scharf, *Der Wind wird uns entführen*.

[9] Gölz, "Dah Šab," 107–9.

[10] See the compilation of speeches and poems by Mo'azzen, *Dah shab*.

[11] The statement by Kurt Scharf is not published in the collection compiled by Nāṣer Mo'azzen; it can only be found in unauthorized recordings of the event. See Gölz, "Dah Šab," 105.

[12] Mo'azzen, *Dah shab*, 694.

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freely for ten evenings and then it's all over again." At first, as hoped, nothing happened. People went home and remained calm. But Iran did drift toward revolution, and the *dah shab* contributed to this process. The following interview reports on the atmosphere at this revolutionary moment and the courage of the participants.

Interview

OG: During what time period were you employed at the Goethe-Institut in Tehran, and what were your duties?
KS: I was transferred to Tehran on March 1, 1973. However, due to residual vacation entitlements from my previous position, I did not actually arrive in Tehran until mid-March. On March 21, the Persian New Year was celebrated and for me accompanied by impressions of a completely different world. I stayed there until the middle of 1979. The transfer date was September 1, 1979, but I left Tehran on July 1 because of regular home leave.

OG: But at that time the Goethe-Institut was still open?
KS: It remained open much longer. It was closed by the Dutch comedian Rudi Carell, as I like to say jokingly. The Goethe-Institut was closed in 1985 or 86. Rudi Carell had previously created a satirical show, where he had cut together pictures of Khomeini blessing the masses with pictures of Iranian women rummaging through lingerie at a seasonal clearance sale. In the following scene it looked as if he were reaching into the lingerie. Although there was no satellite television at the time and nobody in Iran could have seen these pictures, the masses allegedly spontaneously gathered for demonstrations and demanded the closure of the Goethe-Institut, as the supposed spearhead of a decadent and insulting Western culture. They were obviously looking for a pretext, and Rudi Carell provided them with one. We suspected then that the closure was because the Goethe-Institut was the last of the larger cultural institutes to continue its work. In particular, language courses were offered, with joint classes for men and women.

OG: Where was the Goethe-Institut located in Tehran?
KS: It was on a side street in the Abbās Ābād neighbourhood, between the Khiyābān-e Pārk and the Khiyābān-e Bohārest, and this side street had a number, as was customary in Tehran at the time, Khiyābān-e Haftom (7th Street). It was located on a villa plot. The house was very large for a residential building, but not quite large enough for an institute. The basement was used as a library, and on the first floor there were offices and a reception room, which was used for events, mostly exhibitions. Behind the building was a garden, which was very large for a residential house. It was big enough for 1,000 to 1,500 people, but then it was really full.

OG: In the 1970s, poetry readings were repeatedly held at the Goethe-Institut. Was there a program behind them or were these readings held due to the personal commitment of individuals?
KS: I would say both. In the 1970s, the Goethe-Institut, worldwide, had the idea that they wanted to work within the local culture and that they wanted to be a partner to local cultural actors. The idea of having a link with Germany within this work was less important. Only in the course of the 1970s did a debate begin about the role of foreign cultural policy, and that is when the idea of a direct reference to Germany was formulated. In this context, it made sense to ask what the respective host or partner countries considered to be important parts of their culture. You must also remember that World War II had happened not that long ago, and the Goethe-Institut had only been founded twenty years earlier. Consequently, our aim was also to restore Germany's acceptance as a cultural partner without immediately triggering recollections of the Nazi era. We also felt that foreigners enjoyed a certain amount of freedom that locals didn't have. We thought that we had to bring this into play for the locals. Our line was to dare a little bit more than the locals would dare, but not so much that the institute would be closed down.

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And in Iran until, say, forty years ago, literature, and especially poetry, was considered the pinnacle of culture, so to speak. At that time, the main artistic focus of Iranians was concentrated in this area. Therefore, it was obvious for us to take up our activities in the field of literature—not only by inviting Germans, but also by inviting Iranian poets to read. This was originally initiated by a former employee of the Goethe-Institut living in Tehran, Manfred Thiele, who systematically developed his idea of organizing poetry readings. When I came to Tehran, this idea lived on, and in my early years I witnessed how such poetry readings were organized. These readings impressed and influenced me incredibly. That is how I came across Iranian literature, and it was thanks to this experience that I thought one should actually translate it.

So, we can say that at our institute there was a tradition in this respect. But in the mid-1970s, repression and censorship became harsher, and everyone was scared. That is, both the Goethe-Institut and the poets who could have read. However, in 1977 there was a relatively rapid and astounding, if not fundamental, change brought about by Jimmy Carter's human rights policy. It did not turn the Shah into a friend of human rights, and neither did it transform SAVAK—but they did try to be a little more generous. I was approached about this by Jalal Sarfaraz, an Iranian who remembered that we had cultivated this tradition and asked us if we would be willing to host poetry readings again, under these changed circumstances. He suggested that we get in touch with the association of poets and writers. I remember the name: Kānūn-e Shāʿerān va Nevīsandegān-e Īrān. Jalal Sarfaraz is the one who had the idea for these poetry evenings.

OG: In his opening speech, Dr. Becker (the director of the institute) talks about four series of poetry readings in the six previous years. Were these only small events?
KS: Well, smaller ones. They weren't all that small, they were attended by a few hundred people each, sometimes even more than a thousand, and there were also quite important authors. The two poets I remember being present at readings in 1973 and 74 were Nader Naderpour and Esmail Khoi. I took part in both of these readings, talked to them afterwards, and met them later on as well. I don't remember whether I attended any other poetry reading at the institute before 1977.

OG: What was your impression of the content of these events? Were they political?
KS: With Nader Naderpour, I had the feeling that the audience was even a little disappointed; and it wasn't due to a lack of quality—you can't say that about Naderpour. During that phase of his writing, he tried to make lyrics that didn't use the pen as a sword. I was very impressed by his poetry, and he got a lot of applause from the audience, but there were also voices that expressed disappointment, because what you expect from a poet is different in a repressive situation than in a non-repressive one.

OG: Did you feel the presence of the regime at your institute?
KS: We suspected it. Whenever making a statement, one made sure to formulate it in such a way that, even if it were to be written down, one would not be arrested nor deported. In this respect, the repression was palpable. I once accompanied my boss, Mr. Becker, to a summons from the SAVAK, and that was a very interesting conversation. The people there were not brutal, actually they were rather polite. However, the conversation probably also served the purpose of showing us: We are here, and we are observing what you do.

Khoi certainly read poetry that was also political. During the Shah era, Iranians developed a technique to express new content with conventional vocabulary. Previously, when there was talk about a rose and a nightingale, it meant the lover and the beloved. But in sheʿr-e nou (modern poetry), rose and nightingale could well mean revolutionary and revolution, with the red rose as a symbol of blood and the nightingale as the symbol of a preacher or agitator. In my opinion, Khoi's poem "The North Too" is a successful example of political poetry, which on the one hand is poetic and has something enigmatic about it, so that you don't immediately get it, but on the other hand can easily be interpreted as political.

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OG: I would now like to talk about the organization of the dah shab *(Ten Nights). Who organized the Ten Nights, and who stood out?*
KS: The initiative came from Jalal Sarfaraz, who approached me. That he decided to approach me in particular was probably due to the fact that I had been in the country a little longer than my (deceased) colleague Dieter Gassmann (who was responsible for the cultural program); as a result, my Persian was somewhat better. Therefore, he approached me, because, at least at that time, Jalal Sarfaraz didn't speak any foreign language. That is how I slid into this project. Of course, I also read the newspaper and thought to myself: "Aha, Jimmy Carter's policy is bearing fruit after all." So, I replied that I found the idea very interesting and I would suggest it to my colleagues. Mr. Becker, Mr. Gassmann, and I then consulted with each other, and we very quickly came to the conclusion that we should do this. I then approached Jalal Sarfaraz, who in turn contacted the Poets' and Writers' Association. From then on we had a whole series of meetings, with different people from the association coming to negotiate and discuss things with us.

OG: Was Mr. Sarfaraz a member of the Kānūn-e Nevīsandegān-e Īrān?
KS: I don't know, but it could be. He was a journalist first and foremost. Those who came to the meetings there were all on the board. I remember Behazin and Eslam Kazemieh, I think they were present at all the meetings.

OG: Do you remember any other participants at the meetings?
KS: I have to admit that I don't remember them. The names changed, and I can't remember exactly. None of the people who were particularly close to me were there. Naderpour wasn't; the main reason was that he had a different concept (for him poetry should not be the servant of political goals). Shamlou was already gone. Khoi was not on the board, and Shafi'i Kadkani was very reluctant to get involved. Golshiri, I think, was not there—he was a leading figure in the organization and of the event itself, but I actually only got to know him during the ten nights and not during the preparatory talks. But I'm not quite sure. This might have to do with the fact that at the time I was much more interested in poetry than in fiction—also because to me the outstanding role of poetry seemed to be the special thing about Persian literature.

OG: Why do you think that the Writers' Association was willing to work with you?
KS: I think there were two reasons. One was that the Goethe-Institut—as far as I know—was the only foreign cultural institute with a tradition of such poetry reading series. And the other reason was certainly that they didn't feel quite as vulnerable on the premises of a foreign institute.

OG: In an interview, the poet Gholam-Hossein Saʾedi said that your institute was chosen because the Goethe-Institut was not political and had not acted on behalf of the government of the FRG.[13]
KS: We certainly understood this as political. But it is true that we did not see ourselves as a political institute on behalf of the (West) German government—I believe the Goethe-Institut doesn't do that to this day. We considered ourselves commissioned by Germany, but not commissioned by the government—in stark contrast to the concept of our French or Italian colleagues, who are subject to the instructions of their respective ambassadors. Our ambassadors had a veto right, but it was understood that the Goethe-Institut was allowed to implement foreign cultural policy acting on its own responsibility, within the framework of the social concept of the Federal Republic of Germany: freedom of expression, plurality, democracy, human rights, etc. So, we organized these events in political terms, but not in terms of alliance, party, or military policy or the like. I would say the statement you quoted is correct, but with a slightly different nuance.

[13] See Sāʾedī, Iranian Oral History Project.

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OG: Did you have the feeling that you took a personal or political risk in organizing the evenings and choosing your partner?
KS: Yes. After the initial talks, our institute director, Mr. Becker, talked to the ambassador, informed him about our plans and asked him what he thought about them. The ambassador clearly stated that on the one hand he sympathized with our undertaking, but on the other hand, if difficulties arose, he could do nothing to protect Mr. Becker or any of us. Mr. Becker informed us of the conversation, but all three of us then felt that this should not discourage us and that we should take the risk, because otherwise a good part of the meaning of our work would be lost.

OG: Courageous.
KS: Yes, to a certain extent. But we were always confident that the worst thing that could happen to us would be a short-term arrest and our deportation, not torture or years of imprisonment, like the threat for our Iranian partners. In this respect, the risk they were taking was much greater than what we were doing.

OG: Why was it possible to organize such an event in 1977 with an organization that had previously been banned? You mentioned earlier that Jimmy Carter's politics played a role.
KS: Yes. Absolutely. You could see that newspapers were becoming more interesting. That was a very clear indication for some change. Also, our Iranian interlocutors were no longer as cautious as they had been earlier.

OG: Can you summarize how the Ten Nights were organized? How long was the run-up? Who put the program together? How did you decide on the venue?
KS: As far as I remember, the preparation took a few months. Not a whole year or even half a year, but also not just four weeks or so. We let our partners decide on which writers to invite, what they should read and in which order. First, because they were obviously much more competent in the field, but second also for conceptual reasons. We wanted to offer a stage and to provide support, but not set the rules.

We initially intended to organize these readings at the Goethe-Institut, as we had with the earlier ones. We thought we would reach an audience of approximately 1,000 or 1,500 people per evening. That the number would end up being much higher surprised us; we only began suspecting this shortly before. And even then, we didn't know that it would be as large as it turned out to be. When we noticed that the number of visitors would be too large for the institute, Mr. Becker called the president of the German-Iranian Society—or rather the Iranian-German Society, they always put Iran first out of politeness. They had a very large garden with a few buildings and an event hall, but above all, a really huge garden, on what was then Pahlavī Avenue, on the same level as the Hilton Hotel. So Mr. Becker asked if we could hold our event on their premises. We had done that from time to time anyway, for example for movie nights, because the Iranian-German Society had the appropriate film projectors. So there was already cooperation. As a result, we went there expecting about 2,000 people, maybe a few more. But the 10,000 people who attended on the first few evenings, and the fact that not only was the whole garden full, but also the adjacent sidewalks, took us completely by surprise—and not only us from the Goethe-Institut, also the partners from the Writers' Association. We had some organizational difficulties on the first evening, but basically everyone involved, including the audience, was very flexible. The Iranians' ability to adapt to unforeseen situations was always very great; actually I think it still is very great today.

OG: The difficulties were compounded by adverse weather conditions.
KS: A little later. I can't exactly remember whether we had six evenings of good weather and four evenings of rain, or five-five, or the other way around, four-six, but about half of the evenings had nice weather, and you could stand outside without any problem at all. But then it started to rain, surprisingly early that year. So, it was all the more impressive

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when we had to continue the event outdoors and couldn't move it inside because the audience would have been too large. People stood there, under their umbrellas, listening to the voices of their poets. That was an incredible sight.

OG: But the number of listeners became smaller.
KS: Yes, of course. There were then no longer 10,000, but perhaps 4,000. Some reports mention 15,000 people. That is a myth. There were definitely not that many.

OG: What were your impressions of the atmosphere? What do you remember most? How can you sum up the atmosphere on site?
KS: I was incredibly impressed by the devotion (I am deliberately choosing a word with a religious connotation) with which the young people listened. They were incredibly united and disciplined: 10,000 people listening, without chatting with each other or rustling papers and the like, just listening. Second, I was impressed by how many were standing there with tape recorders to record the readings. Also, the discipline of not pushing and shoving each other to get better seats or anything like that. Everybody was there to listen, and self-interest seemed to recede into the background.

OG: Besides the large crowd, what were the major differences in comparison to the previously organized poetry readings?
KS: The difference was huge with regard to the very large group [of authors who were going to read]. Now there were sixty people, previously one or two or so. That creates a totally different relationship. The atmosphere is completely different when 10,000 people are listening. On the one hand it increases the adrenaline rush, on the other hand it reduces the intimacy. This intimacy can be very special during poetry readings. Intense literary experiences suddenly turned into a literary-political event, where the fact that it was taking place at all became very important.

OG: What were your personal expectations at the opening of the first event? Did you already feel all the excitement?
KS: Not to the whole extent. But enough to choose a different venue. We realized that it would be different from what we were used to. But we only realized how different this was after the first evening had begun.

OG: What was the tenor of the lectures on the first evenings? Did you feel that the content was politically explosive or anything like that?
KS: Yes. We did. We had agreed that we would organize a series of events that did not directly attack the regime. However, we knew that it would be a provocation in and of itself that members of the previously banned and now tolerated Writers' Association were going to read. We had foreseen that some of the recited poems could be interpreted as political, but—if one wanted to—could also be seen as purely poetic, such as those by Esmail Khoi, for instance. So, we had originally thought that the tightrope walk, which we had gotten used to in the meantime, would continue. But on the first evening we immediately realized that this was not the case. Issues of censorship were openly addressed; by different authors, in different manners. On the one hand, we found it very courageous as well as the right thing to do; of course, we were against censorship. On the other hand, we were surprised how explicitly criticism was expressed. And I have to admit that it did not make us happy. We wondered what the consequences would be. First of all, for the institute, second and most importantly, for those who were reading. We were worried, quite worried. But we couldn't help but continue. There was no alternative.

OG: This culminated in a short preface, which Dr. Becker presented on the sixth evening.
KS: Correct. That was because first we asked our partners not to take too many risks, but they continued and became even more vocal. Before the sixth evening we consulted with

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each other and decided that it would be right to say that we wanted a cultural event, not a political event, and that political protest was not our intention.

OG: On the fifth evening there was a speech in which censorship was clearly and openly addressed. Was Becker's speech an immediate reaction to this?
KS: In a certain way, yes. We felt it was a major breech of our agreements.

OG: Were there any reactions to the concerns articulated on your end?
KS: The reactions of the Iranian co-organizers were mixed. On the one hand, there were people who expressed their regrets and did not think it was right to deviate from our agreements. On the other hand, there were people who clearly showed us that their cooperation with us was only a vehicle allowing them to perform publicly, and that otherwise they were not interested in working with us.

OG: Were following lectures more cautious? I am particularly interested because on the sixth evening Siyavosh Kasrai gave his lecture.
KS: I didn't have the impression that people had become more restrained. That would have actually surprised us. Especially with Kasrai. After all, he had the reputation of being a provocateur—or if you prefer: a hero.

OG: Did you feel any pressure from the regime that prompted you to make the aforementioned speech?
KS: No. That was our attempt to show that we wanted to follow a nonprovocative line. It was meant to be a signal to the authorities and to the public.

OG: In what form did state power show itself during the Ten Nights? Was there any police or military presence?
KS: Surprisingly, not perceptible to us. I'm sure that there were people among the crowd who reported to the regime and probably also made recordings and delivered them to SAVAK. But they didn't beat up or arrest any participants. Nor did they—at least as far as we could observe—chase away the people close to the institute.

OG: But there was a police presence in the area around the institute.
KS: That is true. When there is a huge crowd anywhere, the police are bound to show up. But they were so restrained that we were surprised. We were also surprised by the fact that they did not drive the people away from the adjacent sidewalks but let them stay there.

OG: Were there any conflicts with the state power?
KS: No.

OG: Some voices say that the Ten Nights led directly to violent clashes.
KS: I cannot confirm that. No violent clashes were reported to us. I suspect that this is a mix-up with subsequent poetry readings that the Iranians organized on their own, for example at the University of Technology, the Āryāmehr University.

OG: In his closing speech, Houshang Golshiri called on the participants to remain calm. What prompted him to do so?
KS: We didn't talk about it afterwards, but he really struck a chord, not only with me, but with our team as well. We were worried about where all of this would lead. What would happen at the end of the series and when the outlet tightened again? I took it as an expression of concern about what happens when you can speak almost freely for ten evenings and then it's all over again. Actually, still today I believe that it was meant to be that way. I don't believe that anything happened on the ninth or tenth evening that caused him to make this statement, but that it was the overall mood of the ten evenings.

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OG: What was your conclusion about the event, in the immediate aftermath?
KS: On the one hand, I was thrilled because the people were so courageous. Second, I was thrilled because I thought it was great that so many young people had come to listen to the voices of the national poets and writers, and that literature could have such a high status in public. On the other hand, unlike Dr. Becker, I thought that this should not be overestimated. The writers used us. Partly in a fair exchange, partly they certainly regarded us as useful idiots. In the long run, the Goethe-Institut played no role for them. For them it was important to present an intellectual cultural program and to make a public demand for freedom of speech. The fact that the Goethe-Institut had contributed was welcome and there was a certain amount of gratitude, but they quite rightly regarded the evenings as an event in its own right and did not overestimate our role in it. Mr. Becker and I had different opinions regarding this issue. He saw the role of the Goethe-Institut as supporter of a democracy movement. I disagreed: 10,000 young people who were enthusiastic about literature, that was an impressive number. But when I thought of the masses who gathered at the Friday sermons in the run-up to the Islamic Revolution, what we had done was of absolutely no significance in comparison.

OG: Is that also your view of the Ten Nights today? Or would you say that this set a ball in motion?
KS: I would not say so. I have spoken to several Iranians who think that it set a ball in motion, but I believe that is an overestimation of the political impact culture can have. An overestimation that I personally find very likable. It would make me happy if culture had such an effect, but I am very skeptical.

I don't believe that intellectuals played a significant role in the Iranian Revolution. We observed the demonstrations. There were 10,000 Islamists and somewhere among them 300 intellectuals. Of course, I believe that the impact intellectuals can have on the spiritual atmosphere of a country should not be underestimated: they are multipliers and that means a lot. But for a rebellion they don't play an important role, unless they organize themselves according to the Leninist model. I didn't have that impression at all. I think the intellectuals did set a stone in motion, insofar as they initiated a public discussion. The later public debates at the Dāneshgāh-e Tehrān (Tehran University) or the Dāneshgāh-e Āryāmehr (University of Technology) were very impressive. I would say that was a continuation of something that started with the *dah shab*, among other things. But in the end, these events were not tremendously important for political development, otherwise Iran would not currently be an Islamic Republic.

OG: Do you have the feeling that the intellectuals played with religious connotations? The communist Siyavosh Kasrai recites a religious poem, for example. How can this be explained?
KS: Above all, most intellectuals considered Islamic heritage an important part of their cultural identity. And then, among left-wing intellectuals, there was a widespread illusion at the time that one could use the mullahs. Actually, it happened just the other way around. A lot of people thought that the Communist Party, the oil workers and the intellectuals, were really well organized, because they had the concepts. They thought the masses who supported the mullahs should get rid of the Shah, and once they got rid of him, they would show the way, because the mullahs had no coherent concept. That turned out to be completely wrong: Khomeini had a lot of followers and he did have a concept. Besides, the mullahs were skilled debaters. I know there were voices that spoke highly of the intellectual level of the clergy. But most of the leftists had no idea. They never went to the Friday sermons.

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