War Journal

MEHRDAD KHAMENEH

WAR JOURNAL

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EXIT THEATRE

Exit Theatre
Norway
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HERBAL TEA
JUNE 13, 2025

On the first day of the war, the residents of our eighteen-unit building immediately turned their attention to safety and precaution. A first-aid kit was placed in the basement, and a former Red Crescent volunteer was appointed to manage it. We formed a team to help elderly neighbors reach the shelter quickly, and offered each other emotional reassurances—there was no need to panic; we were in this together.

Around midnight last night, as the air raid sirens began, Shirin woke me up. Shouts echoed from the street. The building's hallways buzzed with confusion and alarm.

For a moment, I thought we'd been hit. I searched for fire, for smoke. I rushed out, ready to help move the elderly from the upper floors to the basement, just as we'd planned.

But there was no sign of damage. One of the residents drove off in a panic. A few others stood in the parking lot. We soon realized the noise wasn't from a bomb—it was from people's fear.

A small group of us gathered, unsure whether to wake the others. There didn't seem to be a strong reason to. So we brought out a few chairs and sat down together.

Everyone had their heads bent over their phones, sharing updates from bombed areas in Tehran.

Mostafa, the youngest in our building at eleven, was born here. He lives with his Afghan parents, who work as

caretakers. He loves football, just finished fifth grade, and is top of his class. Before the war, we had planned to pool money to send him to a summer football camp.

He stood quietly to the side, watching. I called out, "Mostafa, now's the perfect time for a football match." He laughed. I added, "When you go to camp and eventually sign with Barcelona, don't forget us!" He laughed again and said, "Okay."

Just then, a fragrant aroma drifted through the air. Our quiet next-door neighbor appeared with a tray of herbal tea. He and his foreign wife are extremely reserved—you barely see them all year. A cheerful neighbor followed, holding a box of sweets, her young daughter beside her. This family cares for the building's stray cats and knows each one by name.

As we sipped tea and nibbled on sweets, she gave updates on all the neighborhood's pregnant cats and their recent births.

We shared a photo of our dog Rosie, muddy and joyful in the northern rice paddies. Our quiet neighbor showed us a picture of his cat, who had passed away last year after thirteen long years.

No one was checking the news anymore—unless it was to share a photo. The anxiety had melted into a quiet warmth.

I joked with the quiet neighbor, "You brought us tea in glass cups, but you're drinking from a clay mug. Next time, I want whatever's in that mug." He laughed. "It's just tea," he said. "I made this mug myself."

That's when I learned he was a potter—an accomplished artist.

Two hours passed like this. A hush settled over the neighborhood. We moved out into the courtyard, and the sound of birdsong floated in the air.

The smokers lit up as if there were no war, and the conversations deepened—as if, for those few minutes, we were simply together.

The herbal tea had done its work.

TEHRANIS
JUNE 16, 2025

Yesterday, when Tajrish was hit, the first person I thought of was the father of my high school friend, Gholamreza—killed in Shalamcheh during the Iran–Iraq War. His father still runs a small grocery store in the same corner of Tajrish. Back then, he used to treat us to raisin cake after school, and over the years, I grew deeply fond of this kind, grieving man. I longed to hear his thick Azeri accent again.

What I did was madness. In the height of chaos, I set out for Tajrish. But the shop was shuttered. I got caught in the flood on Shariati Street after the bombing and came back soaked and dejected. All the while, people were pressuring us to leave Tehran—telling us to head north, asking why we hadn't packed yet. As if staying in our own home made us fools.

When I got back, I couldn't stop thinking:
Where is my Tehran?
Why is it that when the enemy demands parts of this city be evacuated, something inside me refuses? A stubborn voice that says: No. I won't go. Especially because it's the invader demanding it.

What is this feeling? Is Tehran a kind of mother—a city that took us all in, from every corner of the country, through our families or by our own paths?

Is it memory? Why is it that no matter where I go in the world, no matter how many years pass, Tehran still feels like home? Here, I can connect with anyone, speak freely, laugh easily—just be myself.

Is Tehran a culture? A place where my Gilak mother met my Khorasani father, where they married—though he never touched her salted fish, and she never liked his sweet pilaf—and yet they lived under the same roof until their last breath, in their city: Tehran. The same house where Shirin and I live now.

Tehran isn't just geography. It's far more complicated than that. A city where maybe ninety percent of us are migrants. You hear different dialects every day—and it delights you.

Tehranis don't belong to one tribe, one language, one tradition. We are from everywhere, yet we share a character. We are Tehranis.

I don't blame those who choose to leave—they're exercising their right, and that's entirely fair. But I won't leave just because the enemy says I should. I'll stay, and in these difficult days, do what I can to be a source of comfort to those around me.

If, in this country, so many of our basic human rights have been taken from us, then at the very least, let us choose—if it ever comes to it—where we want to die.

And without sentimentality, I say this:
If I must die, I'd rather die in my home.
I'm not crazy. And I know the millions of others who remain in this city aren't crazy either.

DISTRICT 3
JUNE 17, 2025

"Evacuate!"—all day, that word spread by mouth like wildfire. A threat from the Israeli Ministry of Defense: District 3 was supposedly next. I kept thinking how surreal this moment was—how the aggressor, through threats, surrender demands, and psychological warfare, was trying to make people surrender without resistance. Hands on their heads, hearts full of fear, stepping away from their own city.

In our eighteen-unit building, the first aid volunteer quietly packed up and left the night before, heading to another city. By 6:00 PM the next day, nearly everyone else had gone too. Only Shirin and I remained, along with Mr. Samad, the caretaker, and two elderly households. Just two other units still had lights on. The rest had emptied out, and the building sank into an eerie silence.

Mr. Samad had sent his wife and children to stay with relatives in another part of town. I told him, "If you want to go too, you should be with your family."

He looked slightly hurt and said in his Herati Dari accent, "Where would I go? No, sir. I'll stay at my post. If something happens, you won't manage alone. Since some neighbors stayed, I'll stay too."

I said, "Then let's go knock on the neighbors' doors—let them know we're here if they need anything."

One of our elderly neighbors opened the door with a warm smile and a flicker of unease in her eyes.
"Don't stay because of us," she said gently. "You should go. We don't have a choice. I need to connect to my oxygen machine every hour, and my husband's got a long list of medications. We're more comfortable staying here."

Trying to lift the mood, I said, "Oh no, we've made plans. We've practiced how to carry you both to the shelter on our backs. We're just waiting for the right moment!"

She laughed. "No, no, we can still walk—we're not that helpless."

I wanted to offer some comfort. "They're targeting areas beyond Modarres. Another part of District 3—not here."

She asked, "So they're not going to hit us?"
I said, "No. Don't worry."

Later, Shirin, Mr. Samad, and I sat in the courtyard. He started sharing memories of the war in Afghanistan—how a mortar took half his best friend's face, how they fired into homes, street by street, how they ran for their lives.

I told a few stories of my own.
"During the Iran–Iraq war, we'd climb onto the roof at night to trace the missiles in the sky and guess where they'd land."
Then I added, "Here's the funny part: I escaped that war and went to Europe to study. One day in class, the whole university building shook. I knew instantly—it was a bombing. They'd hit Zagreb. And guess what? The first target was the Faculty of Dramatic Arts. Just our luck. The Balkan war. And now this one. Third time's the charm!"

We all burst out laughing.

At that moment, our elderly neighbor opened her window, waved, and called out cheerfully,
"You were right! They're not hitting us!"

Seconds later, a deafening blast ripped through the air.

We ran inside.

They had hit the IRIB building.

Moments later, the parking gate creaked open. One of the neighbors had returned.

“They told us this place would be hit, so we went somewhere else. And they hit exactly that place,” she said, almost amused. Then added:

“Should I bring out the samovar and a rug so we can sit in the yard?”

DR. KESHAVARZ
JUNE 17, 2025

For as long as I can remember, Dr. Rahim Keshavarz's pharmacy was the only place my family trusted for medicine and hygiene supplies. My mother's unwavering loyalty had ingrained this habit in all of us over the years. Dr. Keshavarz was originally from the village of Fatideh in Langarud, and even now, Gilaki proverbs would slip naturally into his speech whenever you talked with him.

But what always caught my attention was the deaf employee working there — a tall, handsome young man with an athletic build who communicated confidently and gracefully with every customer.

Yesterday, Shirin and I stopped by to check on him. He greeted us warmly, as always.

I said,

"Doctor jan, I'm so glad you're here. We just wanted to say hello and see how you're doing."

The doctor gestured toward the young woman standing to his left and the middle-aged man to his right behind the counter and said,

"As long as these trees outside are standing tall, so are we."

The young female coworker joked,

"Last night Netanyahu called and said, 'Rahim, every time I

look at the map, your pharmacy is still open — come open a branch in Haifa too!'"

The middle-aged man added,

"We don't have anywhere else to go. Even if we did, we wouldn't leave."

Dr. Keshavarz turned to Shirin, smiling,

"My dear, you've lost weight!"

Shirin smiled back,

"I've been working out, Doctor jan."

"What kind of workout?" he asked.

"Swimming," she said.

His eyes lit up with excitement,

"Are you a champion? How many medals have you won?"

Shirin laughed,

"I'm too old for competitive sports! I coach now, and I work as a lifeguard."

Suddenly, the doctor disappeared behind the counter. A moment later, he returned holding a large laminated photo. It showed that same confident young man wearing three gold medals around his neck.

With pride shining in his eyes, the doctor said,

"This is Mehrad — my son. That photo's from last year at the National Workers' Sports Competition. Three gold medals in swimming."

We were stunned.

Then his cheerful expression faltered. His smile faded.

"That was his last photo in Iran. He left for Canada last year."

Just then, a few customers walked into the pharmacy. We quickly said our goodbyes and stepped outside — our hearts heavier than when we had arrived.

CAFÉ BRÛLÉE
JUNE 19, 2025

Once the sound of explosions died down, I turned to Shirin and said,
"Wanna go to the café?"

She hesitated,
"You really think it'll be open?"

I smiled,
"If it is, let's go have a slice of that Norwegian apple pie."

We made our way to our usual spot in the neighborhood—Café Brûlée. It was open, with a few customers sitting outside around two tables. One of the café managers, also named Shirin, spotted my Shirin and immediately came over. They embraced tightly.

With her raspy, tear-tinged voice, Café Shirin said,
"Why didn't you wear lipstick today?"

My Shirin, nearly on the verge of tears, replied,
"We rushed out. Didn't have time."

"Don't come again without lipstick!" Café Shirin scolded warmly.

But Café Shirin's real passion is writing. Her parents were a translator, a writer, and a painter. She runs the café with another woman and a man. More than just a business, Café Brûlée is a social space shaped by their shared vision — a place where modern, cosmopolitan urban culture feels

natural and effortless. It transcends the boundaries of traditional and modern Iranian coffeehouse styles, and could easily belong in Paris, London, New York, or a sun-drenched Mediterranean city. It's a symbol of a new generation — rooted in a bustling metropolis like Tehran, yet offering a fresh, contemporary identity.

From the moment you interact with the staff and managers, to the way the pastries are baked and artistically presented, to the décor — the books in one corner, the paintings in another, and the carefully chosen fresh flowers on every table — everything reflects the unique personality and vision of this cultural-social haven.

We settled at a table with the others. Everyone was smiling.

I said,

"It's amazing you're still open. In the middle of bombings, I suddenly craved your Norwegian apple pie. It's like peace and calm, Norwegian-style, delivered straight to the soul through the stomach."

One of the women managers responded,

"That's exactly why we're open. We know our customers need a space now more than ever — to step away from the daily horror. Honestly, it makes no financial sense."

Café Shirin shared,

"This morning, one of our regulars came in — a strong, athletic guy. But today, he was slouched and distraught like I'd never seen him. He sat quietly for a few minutes, talked a bit, drank his coffee… and then gradually, it was like he started to breathe again, stood tall, and left."

The male manager added,

"I told all the staff — if you're scared, go home. Come back

when things calm down. As long as they feel safe here and want to work, we'll stay open."

I said,

"If the staff ever leave, we're right here in the neighborhood. We'll take shifts and keep the café running. You just keep baking those pastries."

He laughed,

"I can bake you some really lopsided ones."

I smiled back,

"Don't worry about how they look — we'll call it a new wartime style. Artistic, even."

We stayed a while longer, laughing and joking with friends. Then we headed home—to the sound of another round of bombings.

NEGIN FRUIT MARKET
JUNE 20, 2025

Last night, just two alleys down from us, a strike hit. The smell of gunpowder and dust hung in the air long after. Nearby streets were closed for hours. Following a cyberattack on two major banks and the freezing of people's accounts, access to international internet was cut off as well. For many, the fear of missing their monthly salary only deepened the daily anxieties.

This morning, Shirin and I decided to walk around the neighborhood to see what had happened.

Mr. Mehdi, the local fruit seller, runs "Negin Market." Just as my mother had a devoted loyalty to Dr. Keshavarz's pharmacy, my father was equally insistent that we buy fruit only from Mehdi's shop. He's originally from Sabzevar.

Years ago, when Mehdi heard my father had passed away, he sent a box of dates to our house with a note:
"Please count us among those who share your grief. —Mehdi, Negin Market."

Today, outside his shop, he was deep in conversation with a few neighbors. We greeted everyone and stepped inside with Mehdi.

I asked, "What's the news?"

He said, "They arrested four people in the neighborhood yesterday. They had remote control over a drone. Two more

were caught a street over. They're saying yesterday's explosion was their doing."

I asked, "Is your family safe?"

He replied, "I sent them to Sabzevar. I have three kids. They couldn't sleep at night from the blasts — just cried. But I stayed here alone. It's been five days in Tehran with hardly any customers. I want to keep the shop open, but if no one comes, everything spoils and I have to throw it away. I can't buy a whole crate of produce at the wholesale market if no one's here to buy it."

He sighed, "If more people had stayed, this wouldn't be such a problem for either side—those who fled or those who stayed. These smaller towns can't suddenly absorb so many people. Nobody thinks about who's supposed to move the cargo in all this chaos. Who's transporting the goods? There has to be fuel, right? One of my relatives wants to return but has to wait three days just to fill up his tank—fifteen liters a day—before he can drive back home."

As Mehdi spoke, a truck pulled up ahead. Moments later, a police car and a motorcycle with two armed officers arrived and approached the truck driver and his cargo. Mehdi stopped talking and went outside to see what was going on. He returned and said, "It's nothing — a neighbor moving."

I handed him my bank card and said, "Mehdi jan, just pack whatever fruit you think is good for us—let us help make up a little of today's loss."

He smiled gently, "No, really — none of that. I was just speaking from the heart. This shop is yours. I won't take a cent."

AMIR
JUNE 20, 2025

It's been nearly ten years since Amir, our neighborhood grocer, and I started joking around with each other. Of course, he insists on calling his tiny shop "Amir's Hypermarket." He's a born-and-bred Tehrani and absolutely obsessed with football.

A typical example of his antics goes like this: Shirin calls him and says, "Mr. Amir, I just need a small bottle of frying oil, please." He sends over two large bottles. I call him and say, "Amir, what on earth did you send us? We won't go through this much oil in three years."

He replies, "Sorry! I've got checks to cover. Just use a bit more oil — support the working class!"

I shoot back, "Since when are shopkeepers part of the working class? Have you been stalking my Instagram again?"

He just bursts out laughing.

Then I ask, "Amir, do you think there'll ever come a day when your jokes and this friendship of yours actually work in our favor?"

This morning, we went to the neighborhood taftoon bakery. The baker was sitting outside and told us that because of low customer turnout, they're only baking in the afternoons now. So, we headed to Amir's to see if he had any packaged bread.

As soon as we walked in, he blew me a kiss from across the store and greeted me with his usual warm grin.

I said, “Don’t get all sweet on me. I’m here to see if you’ve been price-gouging lately. If you’ve jacked up your prices, I swear I’ll throw a Molotov cocktail at your shop. I’ve got no beef with the government or Israel — just you.”

We hugged. I asked about his family.

He said, “We’re all still here. We don’t have anywhere else to go. Whatever happens, happens.”

I asked, “Got any bread?”

He replied, “They delivered some this morning. Today’s date. Still fresh.”

He brought over two packs and said, “Factory price. How’s that?”

I said, “Good. Keep going in that direction.”

He grinned, “Want some butter? Lighvan cheese? Traditional yogurt?”

I said, “You trying to kill us with cholesterol in the middle of a war? No, thanks. Just ring me up — I'm starving. Call if you need anything. I’m around.”

Then I said, “Amir, can I take a photo of you? I want to write about you.”

He asked, “About me?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Go for it!” he replied.

But the moment I raised the camera toward him, he got shy and covered his face with both hands.

I said, “Well, I’ll be damned — I’ve lived to see shy Amir.”

He said, “No, no, wait! Okay — take it now!”

Click.

EMERGENCY EVACUATION (DR. DRAGO ŠTAMBUK) JUNE 22, 2025

Four days before the Israeli military invasion of Iran, Shirin had applied for a visa at the Croatian Embassy in Tehran so we could travel together for our summer holiday in July.

A week after the war began, the embassy contacted me to say my wife's visa was ready. We went there together. Ms. Sanja Matijević, head of the consular section, said, "Given the current circumstances, we've issued your wife an emergency visa, valid for one year." I asked, "If the situation deteriorates, do you have provisions for an emergency evacuation from the country?" She said, "Yes, we're in discussions. Will you come with us?" I replied, "Not alone—only with my wife. She has a heart condition, and her health worsens every day with this situation. The stress is extremely hard and dangerous for her." She nodded, "Of course. I'll put your names on the list."

Not even an hour after we returned home, Ms. Sanja called: "Be ready for tomorrow! Please keep your luggage to no more than a backpack." I asked, "What route will we take?" She said, "Most likely overland via the Van border crossing into Turkey."

We began packing in silence. As we tidied the house, I thought: twelve years after returning to this country, this

might be where it ends—right in the middle of a war. When I first left Iran at eighteen, it was during the Iran-Iraq war, also overland through Turkey. Then, it felt like a one-way departure. But this time, I wasn't alone. I had a responsibility —not just for myself, but for Shirin. How could I protect her from the hardships ahead so she wouldn't suffer physically or emotionally? Would my experience and connections abroad be enough? I didn't know.

That night, the embassy called again. The plan had changed. We were to be at the embassy at 5 a.m. the day after tomorrow (Sunday). We would leave via Astara and cross into the Republic of Azerbaijan.

How would we get to the embassy by 5 a.m.? Taxis only run until 11 p.m., and everything was shut down. The city was full of checkpoints. I told our friend and building caretaker, Mr. Samad, what was happening. Without hesitation, he said, "I'll take you on the back of my motorcycle." I said, "No, it's more dangerous for you than for us. If a checkpoint stops you, you'll be in trouble. They're already looking for excuses to deport Afghan citizens. The last thing we need is for them to accuse you of spying." He said, "Don't worry, I know a few Iranians. I'll make a call."

On Saturday morning, Mr. Samad called: "I found someone. The caretaker from the next alley is Iranian and drives passengers. He'll come get you—no problem."

On Sunday, June 22, the U.S. joined Israel in the war against Iran and launched a military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

At 4 a.m., we entrusted our entire life to Mr. Samad—our house keys, car, and some cash. We embraced him and set off.

At exactly 5 a.m., the embassy gates opened, and several diplomatic cars exited. The Croatian ambassador, Dr. Drago

Štambuk, stepped out of a car. A man in his seventies with a kind face approached us and shook my hand. I said, “Thank you for helping us.” He replied, “It’s better that we help each other than leave one another behind.” I introduced him to Shirin. He shook her hand but didn’t let go. He touched her shoulder and led her to a diplomatic car. “Please, come. Don’t worry—we’ll be together.”

We headed toward Astara.

About Dr. Drago Štambuk:

Born on September 20, 1950, on the Croatian island of Brač, Drago Štambuk is a renowned physician, poet, essayist, and diplomat. Trained in medicine at the University of Zagreb, he specialized in internal medicine with a focus on liver diseases and AIDS research in London during the 1980s.

After Croatia’s independence, Štambuk entered diplomacy, serving as ambassador or plenipotentiary representative to the UK, India, Egypt, Japan, South Korea, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, and since 2019, Iran. He was also a visiting professor at Harvard.

One of Croatia’s leading contemporary poets, he has published over 70 poetry collections translated into many languages. His English works include Disorderly Animals and Black Wave. In 2024, he hosted Iranian opera singer Reza Fekri at his poetry festival.

In 2019, Japan awarded him the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star for his cultural and diplomatic contributions.

BAKU
(DANIEL DRAŠIĆ)
JUNE 23, 2025

At our first stop on the way to Astara, we met the entire embassy staff. Mr. Daniel Drašić, the consular officer, approached me and handed over my visa for the Republic of Azerbaijan, along with a travel code for the country. I asked, "What about Shirin? Does she need a visa with her Iranian passport?" He said, "Apparently yes." I also said, "Her Schengen visa starts July 1. Will that be a problem?"
Daniel smiled and said, "Yes, it will be a problem in both cases. But we'll solve it. Don't worry."
Without delay, he contacted the Croatian Embassy in Baku right there.

Daniel is from the Zagorje region of Croatia, specifically the city of Varaždin. Seriousness, high energy, precision, and integrity are hallmarks of people from that area—and you could see all those traits in Daniel from the very first moment. He immediately reminded me of my colleagues from about 25 years ago, also from that region.

At the next stop, Daniel came up to us again: "Shirin's visa for Azerbaijan has been issued and entered into their border system. Regarding the gap between her arrival and the start of her Schengen visa, we will issue a humanitarian emergency visa for Croatia here at the embassy in Baku. This

way, she won't need confirmation from the other EU countries and can enter immediately."

Our next stop was the Iran-Azerbaijan border in the city of Astara. Daniel said, "This is where we part ways. On the other side, the Croatian Embassy's car in Baku will be waiting for you. We have to take the ambassador back quickly and can't stay."

At the Iranian passport control, a table was laid out with passports—mostly Iranian-American—waiting their turn. Bottles of water were available for travelers.

It took about four hours before our turn. I was called in and questioned for about 45 minutes about my reasons for staying in Iran and my life there. Then I filled out a form with Shirin's and my details. Our passports were handed over for exit to Azerbaijan. The exit stamp was placed, and we headed to Azerbaijani border control.

As we walked across the bridge, Shirin said softly, "Do you realize this is our Aras River?"

I recited quietly:

"Aras speaks of you, walks your path, rages in your name—Samad, your path is our path..."

In Azerbaijan, I spoke to the border police officer. He was very friendly and warmly said that although Shirin's visa had not yet appeared in the system, there was no need to worry—we could pay $30 and it would be issued immediately. He personally escorted us to the visa counter.

The man ahead of us in line was a middle-aged Iranian. I asked the officer, "Do you accept cash?"

He said, "No, only card payments."

The Iranian man quickly told the officer, "I'll pay with my card."

I thanked him. He replied, “Don’t mention it. This is exactly when we should look out for each other.”

Once we crossed the border, I gave the Iranian man fifty dollars and said, “Please, at least let us buy you a drink. You were very kind.”

He finally accepted, and we parted ways.

In the small border town in Azerbaijan, we sat in a tiny café waiting for the embassy car. We were welcomed with tea and great kindness.

The first question was, “Are you Azerbaijani?”

I replied, “My father is Azerbaijani. I’ve learned a bit from him.”

They immediately said, “Come be our guest at home!”

After some time, the embassy car arrived and took us to the rest of the staff. Apparently, they had also been held up on the Iranian side, and no one had reached Baku ahead of us.

Daniel came and said, “Come with me in my car!”

The whole drive was filled with stories—Daniel about Tehran, me about Zagreb. We also encouraged Shirin to practice the Croatian she had learned and join the conversation.

On the way, we stopped at a gas station, and Daniel treated us to coffee and pastries.

He said, “I’m lucky you came with me. I’ve been up since 3 a.m., and driving this long road alone without company or conversation would have been impossible.”

Around midnight, we arrived in Baku, and Daniel took us to the hotel that had been booked for us. We arranged to meet at the embassy the next morning.

At exactly 10 a.m., a Croatian Embassy staff member in Baku picked us up. We met Mr. Alen Vajda, the embassy’s

consul general. A lawyer and writer, he had Shirin's visa ready.

That afternoon, we met Daniel again in town. We took him to Café Pushkin and arranged our next meeting—either in Zagreb or by the Adriatic Sea.

The next day, the Croatian diplomats from Tehran left for Zagreb, and we stayed two more days near the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan.

ADRIATIC SEA (ALEKSANDRA RADOŠ) JUNE 25, 2025

Aleksandra Radoš—Saša, as everyone calls her—was one of the first people I met in Norway about 25 years ago. She and her family had immigrated there a few years before me. A mother of two, caring and perceptive, a hardworking woman with big dreams and endless energy, she had left the beautiful shores of the Adriatic—her birthplace in Croatia—and was, at the time, living in the small town of Lyngdal.

She was always a solid support for me, someone I could count on. When I returned to Norway from Germany after a few years, she welcomed me into her home until I found a new place to live. When I went to Iran, she immediately introduced me to someone who could help me work and earn money. Naturally, when Shirin and I decided to travel to Croatia, she was the first person I informed.

I asked, "Saša, do you know anyone in Zagreb who could rent us an apartment?"

With her usual vibrant energy, she replied, "Zagreb? Why Zagreb? The sea! Dalmatia! Go to the sea, come to my house. I'll find you work, do theater there, make films, write—do whatever you want with Shirin! I know tons of people who can help you. Why would you go to Zagreb?"

After years of tireless work, Saša had fulfilled her lifelong dream—she had bought a house on the island of Sali, her birthplace on the Adriatic Sea, and furnished it exactly the way she had always wanted. Shirin and I headed to that dream house of hers.

At 3 a.m., we flew from Baku to Istanbul, and a few hours later took another flight to Zagreb. At Zagreb airport, while waiting in the passport control line, a middle-aged female officer glanced at my passport and said, "You don't need to stand in this line—your entry point is over there."

I said, "I know. My wife is Iranian, and the embassy evacuated us from Tehran in an emergency. I need to be with her during inspection."

The officer pulled us out of the line and said, "I understand it's a difficult situation—we've been through it too. Please come with me with your wife."

At that moment, Shirin couldn't hold back her tears. The officer gently touched her shoulder and said, "You're with us now. You're safe here. Everything will be alright."

She took our passports herself, brought them to her colleague in the inspection booth, stamped Shirin's passport, and said, "Welcome to your country!"

Welcome to your country. That phrase sounded so sweet and yet so strange to my ears.

We took the next flight to the coastal city of Zadar, then a boat to the island of Sali. In front of Saša's house, a kind-faced woman named Katarina was waiting for us. She showed us every corner of Saša's beautiful house—every part carefully and tastefully designed. She handed us the keys and said, "If you need anything, just ask—I'm here." She immediately called Saša and told her we had arrived.

Saša instantly expressed her own unique style of hospitality and insisted, “Eat whatever food is in the house, use anything you need—just don’t go into my room upstairs, that’s my room. I prepared everything myself for you. Also, behind the kitchen, there are potatoes—use them quickly. And swim in the sea as much as you can! The sea cleanses everything.”

She repeated her signature phrase to me once more: “Didn’t I tell you? Luck only knocks on the doors of brave people.”

We said goodbye to Katarina and immediately went down to the beach. We swam, swam, and swam—until Shirin emerged from the water with her usual smile.

The End
Sali, Dugi Otok — Croatia
July 1, 2025

EXIT THEATRE

War Journal was never planned. It began with a simple, urgent need: to write—to make sense of what was unfolding, to hold on to what might otherwise disappear. These pages are fragments from a city under attack, from lives held together not by certainty, but by habit, humor, and quiet acts of defiance. They are not declarations. They are acts of witnessing.

The war arrived in Tehran without ceremony. It slipped in through text messages and distant blasts, through cracked windows and the hush of emptied streets. Yet even as homes were abandoned and institutions failed, something remarkable endured: the instinct to stay present, to care for one another, to resist fear by brewing tea, telling stories, and continuing—however uncertainly—to live.

You won't find battle maps or political analysis here. You'll find Mostafa, the eleven-year-old footballer; a café owner who insists on lipstick, even during an air raid; and Mr. Samad, who stays behind so others won't be alone. These are the people who held up the sky while it collapsed—not with weapons, but with decency.

War Journal is a letter to Tehran, a farewell to a home, and an offering to anyone who has ever tried to hold onto life in the dark.

Mehrdad Khameneh
Croatia
July 2025