

HEADLINE: An American in Iran

SERIES: Iran after Khomeini

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Louise Laylin Firouz isn't the last American in Iran, but she's close to it.

She's been jailed and she's seen all of her American friends leave. But she says she isn't homesick for the Virginia horse country where she grew up, the daughter of a wealthy international lawyer whose clients included Iran.

Home for Firouz is the horse farm on the lonely plain of the Turkoman Steppe near the Soviet border, where she spends half the year. She spends her time writing, reading, listening to her shortwave radio and raising Caspian miniature horses, a breed she saved from extinction nearly 40 years ago.

"I considered leaving," Firouz said in an interview at her other horse farm near Tehran, where she spends the rest of the year. "But I realized I had too many dogs, too many horses and too many agricultural responsibilities." Dogs descended from the pets of departed American friends romped on the furniture as she spoke.

Firouz' son is a photographer here, a daughter is thinking of returning from Paris and her other daughter is married to the British charge d'affaires, the highest ranking British diplomat in Iran. Firouz says she sees herself as a kind of Karen Blixin, the heroine of "Out of Africa." She speaks fluent Farsi and runs around with a light scarf barely covering her blond hair.

After Firouz, the presence of U.S. citizens who aren't ethnic Iranians drops off sharply. Western diplomats in Tehran say they've run into about a dozen other Americans, most of them married to Iranian men and some reportedly zealous converts to the Islamic revolution.

There's an American from Texas who runs a travel agency and stays on because his Iranian-born wife can't leave, says a diplomat who's heard his tale. There's an American in Evin prison - Jon Patis, an American engineer who was imprisoned in June, 1986, on charges of spying and using false documents to enter Iran and who suffers from "severe anemia, weight loss and his skin has a green hue," according to a recent United Nations report on Iran's human rights situation. Another American was released from prison last year and there are somewhat vague accounts of Americans working in skilled technical jobs under cover of Italian passports.

Recent estimates by the Swiss Embassy indicate there are more than 2,000 bearers of U.S. passports in Iran, some appearing to be recent arrivals. The Iranian government is carrying on a campaign to attract home the skilled managers and professionals who were among the 1 million Iranians who fled after the revolution, most of them to the United States, where many have become citizens.

But there is little trace of the huge community of 50,000 Americans who lived in Iran in 1978 just before the revolution, mostly in Tehran in enclaves that resembled neighborhoods back in the United States.

Firouz says she doesn't miss that life, which she joined in 1957 when she arrived here fresh out of Cornell University with her new husband, a member of the Qajar family, the royal family that preceded the Pahlavi family of the shah.

But she has plenty of stories about it, including a vivid depiction of the starlit party of foreign diplomats including Americans at her Turkoman Steppe farm a few days before Iranian students took over the U.S. Embassy, the cause of her arrest soon after on vague charges of "suspicion."

She went on a hunger strike and was quickly released, she says, and has been tolerated since by Iranian authorities as a sort of intriguing nuisance because she is eager to lend her knowledge of large-animal care to Iranian agencies and farms.

And some Iranian officials may be delighted by her campaign to prove there is no such thing as the Arabian horse, considered throughout the world as the father of the thoroughbred. Firouz says the so-called Arabian is really an Iranian-born Oriental horse taken back home by Arabs when they invaded Persia in the Seventh Century. An Iranian Horse Society meeting recently broke up in a violent fist fight when she presented her theory there, she says.

"They rather like me," Firouz says of Iranian authorities. "I've contributed a lot to agriculture, breeding horses. I've never been involved in politics. They allow me to travel freely and they even invite me to government meetings."

Ainir Soltani, 40, is typical of the new type of American showing up in Iran. Soltani had left here 21 years ago for Los Angeles where, he says, he was a contractor and sold Mercedes, Jaguars and Rolls-Royces. But the economy soured and Soltani, son of one of Tehran's biggest contractors under the shah, returned six months ago with his wife and three children.

He still hasn't brought his money back with him because he's not sure he's going to stay.

"There's lots of people coming back," he said in an interview in the north Tehran grocery store owned by his brother. "Since I came, six of my friends came back with their families - permanently. Last night, a friend called; he's a civil engineer working for the city [of Los Angeles]. He's coming back." Soltani says Iranians are returning because they "feel they were working so hard, we might as well be back here making our country better," plus it is easier to make money and there is less crime here.

"The reason more people don't come back is they're afraid the government will kill them and take their house and money. But it's not true," he says.

GRAPHIC: Newsday Photo by Josh Friedinan-Firouz with one of her Caspian miniature horses at her farm near Tehran