

Two Families – Forty Years

Ernie and Sue Bentley

Iran 21

1968 – 1970

Ours was a honeymoon Peace Corps tour. We were married three weeks before starting training in Fresno, CA, the summer of 1968. After 13 weeks in Fresno, we arrived in Iran in October of that year. We stayed in Tehran for a few days and then traveled to our village, Kerend, in western Iran. We were closer to Baghdad than to Tehran and were in the Southern end of the Kurdish area of Iran.

Kerend was a very special village just off the main highway between Tehran and Baghdad. The elevation is just over a mile above sea level and it has higher mountains behind the village. It was quite a diverse community when we were there. There were Shia Moslem families, Bahia families, Jewish families and Al Haque families. Al Haque is a religion practiced by many Kurdish people in the area. And we were the Christian family. Despite many differences in our beliefs there was respect for one another and little division.

As Volunteers, we had specific assignments but this was in the days of BAGs (BA Generalists) so we had a bit more latitude than many Volunteers today. Ernie's assignment was as an agriculture extension agent. He worked with farmers on improving chicken flocks and on orchard planting. Sue was a home extension agent. She worked with the women on sewing, cooking and nutrition. She also had a day camp for girls for the two summers we were there. We had flexibility in our day and were able to spend some time visiting with our neighbors as well as on our formal job responsibilities.

When we moved into our house in Kerend, we of course had few possessions and had to purchase almost everything locally. The place to purchase things such as a tabletop two burner stove was at Mr. Salehi's store. It was one of the most substantial stores in a community of mostly flat, mud roofed buildings. When our purchases were delivered, Mr. Salehi's son Behrouz, who was nine years old at the time, came to see the foreigners.

During the first six months of our stay in Kerend, we lived across the street from the Salehi family we were friendly neighbors but did not see a great deal of them. When the house next door to them became vacant we moved in there. After that we became dear friends. Their five children, headed by Behrouz were almost daily visitors to our yard and house, particularly in the summer. We became quite close to them and frequently enjoyed tea together and walks in the mountains. When we left in October of 1970, there were tears all around and many hugs and well wishes.

When we returned to the US, we went about our lives: graduate school, children, and several moves before settling in southwest Virginia. Our daughter was named Jeela, for the Salehis' youngest daughter. Over the last nearly 40 years we had no contact with anyone from Kerend. We had even heard a rumor that it had been blown up during the war with Iraq as it was only 100 km from the border.

We grieved at the time of the revolution and hoped that none of our friends were hurt. Of course we had no way of knowing what had happened to them. We returned to Iran for a very quick trip in 1999, with a tour group of former Volunteers. There were many changes as well as many things unchanged. We were pleased with the progress made in education for women. It was not possible to go to Kerend as the tour only went to Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz.

Everything changed on May 10 of this year. Ernie received a Facebook inquiry asking if he was the Ernie Bentley who was in the Peace Corps in Iran and had a wife named Suzanne. Behrouz had found us after

all this time! He remembered us and told us he had been looking for us for years. He is now living in San Diego with most of his family. His daughter is a lawyer in LA and his son is going to start college at UCLA this fall. His sister Lida is here with her family as well. His two younger brothers are here with their families. His parents are in San Diego also. The only one who isn't in the US is Jeela. She and her family hope to immigrate very soon, within the next year or so.

We have emailed, telephoned and skyped with Behrouz and other members of the family and some of the children, many of whom are now adults. It is as if we never skipped 40 years. The Salehis along with many other Iranian families were our family when we were there. It is a great treasure to be connected to them again. We hope to visit with them in San Diego next spring.

I would not have believed it possible to be reconnected with such special friends. We are thrilled to have them in our lives. In addition to the reconnection with the Salehi family we have made connections with other neighbors. We have also learned a lot more about the village and many of our other neighbors. It is treasure not to be lost again.