

### A. Alex Lari

For Alex Lari, maps are his vocation and avocation. He is an avid reader and collector of maps—maps of old cities he loves and new structures he builds, of roads and bridges he constructs, and monuments and historic cities he adores or preserves, and finally maps of lives, past and present. Biographies are, after all, nothing but maps of lives, creatively imagined but dedicated to signposts of reality. In his vocation as a builder and developer, and his avocation of collecting maps and old letters, reading old and new biographies, and compiling family trees, he combines the disciplined rigor of an engineer, and the passionate commitment of a collector. Whether he is decoding intricate designs of a skyscraper or developing the genealogical maps of his family, he brings to the task a contagious curiosity, relentless energy, and an endearing honesty.

He is a man of many accomplishments and few words. His reticence with words is not for lack of ideas or interests. He chooses his words with the precision of a jurist and the caution of a diplomat. The brevity of his discourse is matched by his candor and honesty. He is at once self-effacing and self-assertive, shy and ambitious, forceful but not abrasive. His shyness can easily be construed as aloofness. He is old-fashioned in his dedication to his family and friends. He is in his demeanor cautious, decorous, even insistent on the solemnities of rituals. In all he does, he uses the cold rigor of mathematics and numbers, preferring the comfort of empirical benchmarks. Above all, he is a man given to relentless order.

Alex Lari was born on 26 June 1943 in Yazd, one of the oldest cities in Iran. The city took its name from Yazdegard, a king from Iran's pre-Islamic days. When the Islamic invasion came in the seventh century, Yazd was amongst the cities that refused to accept Islam, agreeing instead to pay the extra tax levied on those who refused to convert to the new faith. Even today, Yazd continues to be the city where the largest number of Iranian Zoroastrians live. Moreover, many Zoroastrian places of worship are located in the city. In the early part of the new millennium, the

city became something of an international cause celebre when it turned out that the presidents of Iran and Israel were both born in that city.

Lari was born in one of the most gracefully beautiful houses of the city. Known around the city as “the Lari House” the building has been left unattended and members of the Lari family are negotiating with the city to turn it into a historic site, or a museum. There is also another old “Lari House,” but it has been designated a historic monument, worthy of preservation.

Aside from its stunning architecture, Yazd was also known for the entrepreneurial skills of many of its inhabitants, and Lari’s family was one of the city’s eminent merchants. The Laris, as their name indicates, were initially from the city of Lar, in the province of Fars. Early in the 19th century, the founder of the family, Mulla Zeinal, a merchant, moved to Yazd. While in pursuing careers in trade, the Lari family confirmed Yazd’s reputation, they were, in another arena an anomaly. “It is an enigma,” Lari said, “but no one in the larger Lari family, and certainly not my parents were religious.” His mother, Safa Yazdi, for example, was a fashionable woman, more inclined to wear a high couture imported dress than the traditional Islamic dress. Lari’s own birth in his family’s ancestral city and in the “Lari House” was, however, a matter of accident.

Lari’s father had moved from Yazd to the city of Zahedan, closer to Pakistan and India where his trade was centered. When the Second World War began, his business blossomed and he decided to move his family to Tehran. On their way, they stopped in Yazd to visit relatives, and it was there that Lari was born. He was the third child, and the first and only son of the family.

He went to school in Tehran, and ironically the real trauma of his childhood came not during the war but when it ended. During the war years, Iran suffered from great shortages of commodities like tires, wheat and sugar. Many fortunes were made in those years by those who found themselves in possession of a few dozen tires. Cognizant of this fact, Lari’s father invested nearly all of his capital in importing tires and sugar. But when the shipments arrived, the war had ended, the price of both commodities plummeted, and with it, Lari’s fortune suddenly evaporated.

As a young boy, Lari watched in anguish as debt-collectors carted away some things of value from his home. "They even took away my father's flower pots," Lari said with lingering sadness in his voice, "and he had worked so hard on nurturing them."

A few months after the dread experience, the family was on the move again, this time to Isfahan, where the young Lari enrolled in school. He graduated from the city's Harati high school. He was not a good student, finishing with a 12 average, and equivalent to a C average in the American system. His grade for "citizenship" was not much better, showing his lack of interest in all that was happening in his school.

In 1961, he set out for America where he settled in New York City, a place that became his veritable home for the rest of his life. Save for the eight years he spent in Iran, Lari has spent all of his adult life in New York. After spending one night in the local YMCA, he enrolled in college and immediately began to work as well. "Though I received small sums of money from my father," he said, "I also worked throughout my years in college." After two years at Hofstra University where he had initially enrolled, he transferred to New York University (NYU), where he graduated in 1968 with a Bachelors degree in civil engineering, followed in eighteen months, with a Masters degree with honors in the same field.

By the time he graduated, he had been already married for three years. In 1963 he met an Irish-American girl named Eileen Flanagan. Four years later, in 1967, they married, and they returned to Iran in 1970. For eighteen months before returning home, Lari had found employment with a large American construction company. When he returned to Iran, this experience proved invaluable.

The economic boom of the seventies had already begun when Lari arrived in Tehran. The construction industry was one of the most lucrative, and controversial parts of the booming economy. Shortages of raw material and of expertise were rampant. Lari was hired to work at one of the country's largest construction companies, owned and managed by Hamid Ghadimi. His first

job was project manager for the construction of the Shiraz airport. “He was full of energy, and very organized,” Ghadimi remembered. The “bash of bashes” celebrating twenty five hundred years of monarchy in Iran was about to begin near the city of Shiraz, and the construction of the airport, as well as roads to the city and to the site of the celebrations were all behind schedule. What made the work of finishing the project even more daunting was the fact that the Iranian Air Force was one of clients in the project (since military planes were also going to use the Shiraz airport) and General Khatam, the commander of the Air Force had his own “favorite” companies, and he made every effort to make sure Ghadimi’s company is never tempted to bid for another Air Force contract again. But Lari succeeded in finishing the airport and roads on time. In the course of his work, he met another engineer named Ali Ebrahimi who had worked for the same company. Lari and Ebrahimi were both graduates of American universities, and they were both married to American women. Their common profile, and their work together, led first into a partnership and then into a life-long friendship.

During the two years he lived in Shiraz, Lari also began to teach at the university. Lari’s brief tenure as a professor afforded him a chance to bring his basic philosophy of life to his teaching style. His American training and cultural habits have created in him a decided preference for pragmatism, an appreciation for practical truths and a dislike for theoretical abstractions. This cult of the concrete has remained an essential component of his character. Much to his students’ surprise and delight, he took his students to the construction sites he managed and taught them, in practice the processes and problems of construction. Many of them later worked for Lari after graduation.

Two years after his return home, Lari’s life changed. 1972 was a very good year in Lari’s life. His first child, a boy, was born. He would be the first of three—two boys and a girl. But his son’s birth changed his life in another, altogether unexpected manner. Eileen’s pregnancy was made complicated by a surgeon’s error. The mistake threatened her life, but also ended up increasing the

hospital cost. Trying to pay the hospital bill, Lari asked for an advance from the company he worked for and much to his dismay, he was curtly refused. “We are not a bank,” he was told.

And then laws of serendipity chimed in, and about the same time, he was approached by his friend, Ali Ebrahimi, with the proposal to launch a company of their own. “Had I not been rejected,” Lari suggested, “I might not have been tempted to leave.” But he did leave, and the two young American-trained engineers established a new company, calling it in characteristically pragmatic simplicity, Tamin Sakhteman (Providing Buildings).

It took less than a decade for this upstart construction company to become something of a giant by Iranian standards, employing, along with the Prefab housing company more than five thousand people—including two thousand Laborers, technicians, and foremen from South Korea, and three hundred drivers from Philippines, and many Scottish and Israeli engineers. In 1978 alone, for example, the company completed more than 130 million dollars in construction projects. They built everything from residential units for the army and pre-fabricated houses to cement factories, to industrial plants. They also built some of the most technically challenging projects in the big Olympic stadium in Tehran—including the velodrome cycling ring, and shooting ranges.

Their projects were so numerous, and so spread around the country that Lari was forced to buy two small Cessna planes, learn to fly, and commute around the country to different job sites. A joy ride—in those days his only recreation, aside from his life-long passion for friendly games of serious poker—turned out to be unexpectedly important in his life.

Each summer, his wife, Eileen, and their children traveled to the United States where they stayed at the house they had bought. During those months, Lari’s favorite pastime was to take his plane for a short flight to the Caspian coast, have lunch at the picturesque Ramsar Hotel, and then return in the afternoon.

One day, as his plane was taxiing on the tarmac, traffic control told him of a boy seriously injured in a car accident, and of his desperate parents’ hope to take their dying son to Tehran for

treatment. Though the laws at the time forbade Lari's category of planes and pilot license to carry passengers—let alone seriously ill patients—he chose to overlook the law and flew the boy and his weeping parents to Tehran.

And then came the 1979 political tsunami and Lari happened to be vacationing in America when it happened. By then Lari and Ebrahimi had gone their separate ways, with Ebrahimi taking the part of their company that focused on housing, and Lari taking the construction company. Against the advice of friends he decided to return to Iran. Lari returned, and he found a city in chaos. The company he now managed by himself was now defunct. Angry unpaid laborers had converged on the company headquarters in Tehran. Moreover, upon entry at the airport, Lari's passport was confiscated.

After settling the company's business, and trying to arrange for exit visas for the company's remaining foreign engineers, he set out to receive an exit visa for himself. The process proved to be a long ordeal, and eventually he was led to an office that would determine the fate of his application. Much to his surprise, and delight, the man in charge turned out to be the father of the injured son Lari had transferred to Tehran. The son's life had been saved, and now, in recompense, the man immediately approved the exit visa, and before long, Lari was on his way to America, having left behind all but a small part of the considerable fortune he and Ebrahimi had built.

In America, Lari was for a short while without a job. "I had worked all my life," he said, "and doing nothing was simply not an option for me." He made himself an office in his house, he said, and "dressed up every morning, put on a tie, and went to work, downstairs." Eventually, at the urging of his wife, he rented an office, hired a secretary and after securing a four hundred thousand dollar loan, he built a small shopping mall, and thus began a new phase of his life. Dedicated disciplined hard work, and a bit of luck, he believes, is sure recipe for success in America and in life. For him, surely the recipe has worked, as he has led a productive and happy life, and has made two

fortunes—first in Iran, in eight years, and through creating a model construction company, and the second in the US, even larger than the first and in about twenty years.

In the new stage of his life, he created the Claremont Group with his two sons, and his daughter, undertaking a variety of projects—from high-rise condominiums in New York City and suburban office buildings to building and leasing specially designed offices for such federal government agencies as the Internal Revenue Service, Social Security Administration and the FBI. For a while the company also engaged in development of hotels, and even dabbled in manufacturing.

Another change in his life in America was that he began to engage in politics—something he, along with almost every other Iranian entrepreneur, had studiously avoided in Iran. He took part in party politics, helping found the Iranian-American Republicans of New York. He also expanded his social activities by joining organizations like the Foreign Policy Association and the World Affairs Councils of America where he sits on its national board of directors as Vice Chairman. It was in appreciation of his public service and impressive individual accomplishments that in 2003 he was awarded the prestigious Ellis Island Medal of Honor. He also continues his passion for collecting historical letters, rare books, artifacts of other cultures and times, and of course for maps, of places and people's lives.