Skip Auld Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note
Skip Auld served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran from 1973 to 1974 as an English teacher.

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Oral History Interview

with

Skip Auld

October 29, 2019
Annapolis, Maryland

By Julius Sztuk

Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

SZTUK: [00:00:01] Today's October 29th, 2019. My name is Jay Sztuk, and I'm going to be interviewing Skip Auld, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran from 1973 through 1974 and was a teacher of English as a second language. Good morning, Skip.

AULD: [00:00:24] Hi, Jay.

SZTUK: [00:00:24] Thanks for interviewing today.

AULD: [00:00:25] Yes.

SZTUK: [00:00:26] Tell us about your background, how you learned about Peace Corps and why you decided to join.

AULD: [00:00:32] So I went into Peace Corps right out of college. I had been in college at Davidson College in North Carolina. And, I don't know, Peace

Corps was kind of always part of my background growing up. I didn't think a whole lot about it, but in college there were posters about it around the different buildings where we took classes, and so it's kind of in the background and I knew about it. I always think I wanted to go in the Peace Corps, but as I was in my senior year, I was studying South Asian studies for the whole year and among other things, and I knew about Peace Corps. I decided at a certain point in the winter, I think, to apply, and I put in my top three choices. In those days, and I don't know how it is now, but we would put in our top choices for jobs and our top choices for countries. I put in Nepal, India, and Afghanistan as the countries I wanted to go to.

AULD: [00:01:36] That year was the year of the India-Pakistan war, and because the U.S. backed Pakistan, Indira Gandhi pretty much ejected all the Peace Corps volunteers from India that year. So there were no openings there, even though India was of high interest to me. But at any rate, I was brought up to Chicago for an interview for three days and at a certain point was offered to the job to go to Iran. And I didn't know anything about Iran at the time. I thought, well, I learned more about it as I was exploring. I realized it too had an ancient civilization and was of high interest. In some ways it was academic interest that had me wanting to go to India or Nepal or wherever. But, um, but Iran seemed like, wow, that's a very interesting country.

AULD: [00:02:30] And now I've had a lifetime of being aware of Iran, being upset by the, the revolution, and the way Iran is portrayed in the media. It's, so at any rate, that's how I, how I got started getting, getting into the Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [00:02:49] What did your, um, your family think about you joining Peace Corps?

AULD: [00:02:54] You know, I think they were supportive. Our family was going through some real difficult times that year, which is part of why I only stayed for a year. I had spent my junior year of college in southern France, in Montpellier. And when I got back, I was, I was majoring in psychology, and I worked at a mental hospital, a state mental hospital in western North Carolina. And during that summer, my mother had a pretty severe nervous

breakdown. And I learned that she had had one right after I was born. I had never known that, but that happened. And then when I got into school in the fall, my brother had a nervous breakdown. So we had a pretty tumultuous year, which I was trying to do everything I could just to focus on school, finishing my degree. I had a lot of interest, deep interest in learning, and so.

AULD: [00:03:54] I don't know exactly what my family thought about it, but I just said, hey, this opportunity has come up. I'm going to be going to the Peace Corps. And it was like, okay. And so I think it was six days after graduation I got on a plane. About a day later I was in Tehran. We spent a few days in Tehran. One of my college classmates, we had a real small college. So there were only 300 students in my, in my graduating class, maybe even fewer. But one of my classmates was from Iran, and so I visited his family in Tehran. I already had started some of the language learning there, so it was kind of fun. I was able to count to 20 with my, in Farsi, with this, uh, the family of, of this college friend of mine who were from Iran.

AULD: [00:04:49] And at any rate, then after three or four days in Tehran, we went to Borujerd, which is a city down in the middle of Iran, kind of to the to the west, sort of near the mountains. Iran has a range of mountains along the western side and along and then across the northern side. So Borujerd was where we spent the summer, even though it was near the mountains and theoretically it was cooler than the rest of the country, it was really hot all summer. It was well over 100 degrees most days. We would do training in the morning. We were at a hotel. The training group had taken over this hotel in Borujerd, I guess it was the only hotel. Borujerd was a city of about 100,000 people. And so we took over this hotel. We spent our days in training.

AULD: [00:05:40] We had, I don't know, 25 people in the English language program that were there. And that, that was, we were the trainees, probably as many people who were teachers there. Half of them were Americans and half of them were Iranians. And so we had great training on the language, learning the culture, getting out into the town. So yeah, that's, that's a little bit about how that, how it got started.

SZTUK: [00:06:11] So how long was your training in total?

AULD: [00:06:14] Training was about two, two and a half months maybe. Maybe even three. Right near the end. The way, the way Peace Corps worked was that the whole time you were doing a selection process, you were self-selecting either in or out. And the Peace Corps was also deciding whether you're going to make the grade to be able to stay. And so after two and a half months, they sent us all out on our own for about a four day weekend to go to some remote village just to see how we handled it. We had enough language skills, we had enough capacity. I don't remember the town that I went to, but I do remember being there, seeing a whole different part of the, of the country. It was a very rural place that I went to. And then after coming back, maybe a week or so later, they made assignments and I was assigned to a, to a town called Mahallat.

AULD: [00:07:07] Mahallat was a town of 10,000 people. Wonderful, wonderful town. Again, it was kind of in the west, sort of near the mountains. It was going up into the foothills a bit, but not really close to Borujerd. It was sort of a little different part of, of the country. Mahallat was a city that was fed by a spring. They called it the Sarcheshmeh. And it was. So you had at the kind of coming out of the mountains, you had this wonderful spring that was constantly gushing water that fed the town, that fed the fields, and provided drinking water and everything else. And so it was just a great little, little town. I was the only American in the town when I got there.

SZTUK: [00:07:53] Yeah. Now, were, were they accustomed to having visitors from foreign places or was this a novelty to have a foreigner in the town?

AULD: [00:08:07] Well, it was a little of both. For the, for the four years prior to me getting there, there had been two separate Peace Corps couples who had been in Mahallat. Both of those couples had stayed with the same family. And they had, I think they had asked for another Peace Corps couple, but I was a single guy, so they weren't accustomed to that. I got to town. I guess this would have been late August. Just got the bus, got into town, showed up at the school. The school was called Mahmoud Emajd Madrasah or high school. And so I got to the school and it was

summertime. So the school wasn't in session. There was a custodian there. And somehow within a few hours, a lot of the teachers and the principal had gathered and I was drinking tea with them and they were trying to figure out, well, what are we going to do with this single guy? We didn't expect a single guy. They weren't saying this to me but.

SZTUK: [00:09:08] Was that culturally a complicated thing?

AULD: [00:09:10] Well, it was complicated because if there's a couple, there's no issue of, is this guy going to be getting to know my daughters, for example.

SZTUK: [00:09:20] Yeah, right.

AULD: [00:09:20] And that would have been inappropriate.

SZTUK: [00:09:23] They would trust him more.

AULD: [00:09:25] Yeah, it just, it just wasn't going to work. So, so what they did is to set up a cot. And in the school, again, it was it wasn't exactly a gym, I don't think, but it was in a kind of a big open space, like a gym. And so that was where I stayed for two weeks while I started looking for housing. And I, of course, being the only American in town, every time I walked around the town to go buy groceries or anything, I would have a group of 20 or 30 kids, usually young boys, but there may have even been girls among them. But it was, if they were under 12, boys and girls would mix together. But after age 12, they pretty much separated. But I would always have 20 or 30 of them. And everybody knew how to say one phrase in, in English, which is hello, mister. So I heard that phrase. It still sort of jars me to even think about it.

AULD: [00:10:23] But, um, but I would go around the town and at one point I found a home I visited. It was with a person, it was one of these kids who was going to be one of my students. I taught in the ninth grade, so I had students who were all boys ages 12 to 20, because if you didn't pass through the ninth grade, they kept you there. So I had a lot of kids of older ages and they didn't want to kick them out of school, but they would stay

in the ninth grade. But one of these kids had a room and I went and looked at it. I thought, yeah, that looks great to me. So I let the principal know that I'd found a place to stay. He said, Mr. Auld, that's not going to work. And he said, we're going to find something else for you. There was something going on in terms of the class structure. I think this was maybe the kid who showed me the place and his family.

SZTUK: [00:11:17] Yeah.

AULD: [00:11:18] I think his father was a farmer and there was a pretty strong middle class of bankers and merchants and teachers.

SZTUK: [00:11:26] Okay.

AULD: [00:11:27] Teachers were at the, at the top of the social structure in Iran. There was that, and speaking of that, there also was one of the teachers was a mullah who is one of the religious teachers who taught Arabic, taught Islamic doctrine in the, in the school. Even though this was the time of the Shah, you still had that, uh, that depth of, of religiosity in the, in the community. But, uh, but at any rate, it wasn't going to work for me to stay there. And what did work out is that Mr. Resvani was the name of the principal, and he lived in a very nice house about a mile from the school, kind of up toward the spring of this Sarcheshmeh that I talked about earlier, and he had an apartment on the second level of his home. So that's where I, where I got, I lived. I lived on that second floor of the, of the house.

SZTUK: [00:12:32] Uh huh.

AULD: [00:12:32] And would walk to school every day. I think I think Mr. Resvani would drive. I think he had a, like a Volkswagen Beetle or something that he would drive. There weren't a lot of people with cars, but he would drive to school every day. I would walk. We wouldn't do that together. And we didn't become best friends. But he was, we were fairly close. And he would, he would kind of look out for me in different ways.

SZTUK: [00:12:53] Okay.

AULD: [00:12:54] And I did get to know his wife and his two kids. He had a, as I recall, he had one young boy who was probably ten and a couple of girls that were younger than that. And I think, I think because of the ages of his kids, it was going to work for me to be there. And we were separated. I was in a different part of the house and I had my own entrance. Every house in Iran was built, uh, behind walls. So you had, you had walls that enclosed the house. And in the courtyard of the house, you had a, uh, you had a. I don't even know what you'd call it, a place where you could have a little pool, not a swimming pool, but a pool that you would use to maybe wash your hands or just to kind of clean up. But it was a place where you'd have fresh water and all types of gardens and flowers. The Iranians love flowers. And, and so anyway, that's how I, how I got settled there. Uh, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:13:58] Did that create any problems with the student? I bet they were disappointed not to have you come and stay at the house.

AULD: [00:14:02] Actually he, um, it never came up ever. It never, never came up. The student was in one of my classes and he wasn't the best student. It wasn't, uh. I just remember him and I remember being really frustrated. The way the classes were set up, we had five classes of about 40 students each. They all sat in long rows. I had to have a monitor for each class. We called it a *moqsair*. The monitor was the person who I would go to if things were getting out of hand, and I would just look at the monitor and look at the person and they would try to get things back in line. So, um. But this one student, and also the five classes were set up by levels of ability. So you had an A, B, C, D and F kind of a, kind of a class, or E whatever in the Farsi. Aleph, be, se. I don't remember the alphabet very well anymore, but it was, uh, it was done that way.

AULD: [00:15:04] This person was in the really struggling group. And I remember one day I brought in some silverware and I just held up a spoon and I said, *ghashogh*, which is the Farsi word for spoon. And I said spoon. I said, and then I said, in Farsi, now repeat spoon. And he just couldn't do it. It was, it was a kind of a sad situation. On the other hand, I had the A class where I had kids who really were, were great. They were, they were, they had

learned English. They had been studying English for a, for a number of years. And so you had all the gradations between as well.

SZTUK: [00:15:41] So your Farsi language training must have been very important to you living in that community.

AULD: [00:15:47] Oh, yeah, yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I did pretty well at the time, at least with spoken Farsi. But as one of those students in the A classes said late in the year, in the spring. So we started classes actually in October and by around April this one student, probably the best student in the whole class, said Mr. Auld, we've been learning English all year. When are you going to learn Farsi? Because I really, I thought I was good at spoken Farsi and I was okay. I got by, but I was not. I couldn't read it really much at all. I could and I learned the alphabet and they used the Arabic alphabet, even though the language itself is an Indo-European language and they are an Indo-European people, not Arabic or not Semitic. So. Um. Yeah. So, anyway.

SZTUK: [00:16:39] So did you think the Peace Corps training prepared you very well for that assignment?

AULD: [00:16:47] It was, it was an immersive training and an immersive experience. So, yeah, I mean, if you're going to take someone, just a raw recruit out of college, and put them through a basic training program, it did pretty well. I mean, we were all learning the language and out of 25 of us, you know, we all had different capacities, different levels. Like I said, I felt I did pretty well in learning the language, learning the culture, learning customs, because we had the Iranian teachers with us. They became great friends at the time and we saw them every day. We took classes, we had dinner, and we had meals together, outings together.

SZTUK: [00:17:30] So did they make you speak Farsi all day long and tried to discourage you from using English?

AULD: [00:17:35] Pretty much. It wasn't. Yes and no. Yes and no. I mean, we would, we were speaking Farsi all day long. I mean, we were doing it, but we would speak English too. So it wasn't a forced discipline on us. But so,

yeah, I thought, I thought it worked pretty well. The, they also taught us techniques of teaching because, again, most teachers in America have gone through certification programs to learn techniques, to learn how to, how to develop lesson plans. So they taught us things along these lines, but they emphasized that in Iran most people did rote learning. It was really a rote learning system. It wasn't the critical thinking type of, type of learning that we do in America. And so, so it was a different, different approach to things.

AULD: [00:18:28] And I used that technique and trying to get sort of repetitions of phrases, but it wasn't ever getting them where they had a facility with the English language except for in that A class. For some reason those students, maybe because they had family members who were, who were in university and they may have had, may have had more exposure to English, which of course, had become the lingua franca of the times, is still. I think they, they just, they just had a little better capacity with it. And so, um, so through the year, I had a lot of frustration with the classes who weren't really learning much and I wasn't getting through to them. But, but overall it was, it was good.

SZTUK: [00:19:16] Yeah.

AULD: [00:19:17] There was, there was an experience I thought, that I do tell friends about, because we had a boys high school and all men teachers. There was also a girls high school with women teachers. And I had no interaction with any of them until one day, some, I don't even remember what month it was, but probably three or four months into my tenure. I was walking home and a woman crossed the street in her chador, stopped, and started speaking to me in English. She was an English teacher in the girls high school and she just wanted to know. I think she wanted to start, strike up a relationship in order to, to start improving her English, because the, the male teachers had this opportunity regularly. And probably or possibly she had some connection with the women teachers who had been those couples for the four years prior to my getting there.

SZTUK: [00:20:15] Mm hmm.

AULD: [00:20:15] And she may have wanted to try to extend that, but that was the only time I spoke to, uh, well, really to anyone in public. The next day, all of my students came in and said, oh Mr. Auld, when are you getting married? We heard, we heard about you.

SZTUK: [00:20:33] It was big news.

AULD: [00:20:33] Yeah, it was big news and it was like a huge deal. And I don't know what happened with this female teacher.

SZTUK: [00:20:39] So even back in those days, the customs were very restrictive as far as men and women mixing on the streets or whatever. Socializing.

AULD: [00:20:55] Yeah, you wouldn't, you just wouldn't do that. The, the only interaction with women that I had that whole year was being invited into people's homes to have dinner. And that happened really a lot there. The, uh, the Iranians have a custom that's called taarof or tarof. It's really, I liken it to sort of southern hospitality taken to an extreme. And it also has, it's got a lot of layers to it. But let's just say that if you say to a, to an Iranian, I really like your shirt, they'll immediately start unbuttoning it and say, here, you take it. Or they'll just take it. And you say, no, no, that's not what I meant. I just like your shirt.

SZTUK: [00:21:44] Yeah.

AULD: [00:21:44] And they're like, no, you like it, so it's yours. And you just have to then back yourself out of it. Just by the same token, walking down the street every day, I had probably a dozen people a day saying, please, Mr. Auld, come and have dinner, come in and have dinner with me. And I would sometimes say yes after they had said it. I think that if they repeated this over and over, day after day, they were indicating genuinely they wanted to invite you in. So that happened. It happened with the, uh, the mail carrier, the post office person who delivered mail all the time. And I went to his home. I went to, I probably went to dinner at 20 or 30 different homes. So that's the one time I would meet the women of the household.

SZTUK: [00:22:29] Yeah.

AULD: [00:22:30] Not, sometimes the kids, and sometimes the kids would be looking from behind a door in the other room or something like that, just out of curiosity. But the women would. I'd be there having dinner with the man and we'd be sitting on the floor. There's always a table that's a low table. And you would sit. In the cold winter months, you had a blanket over the table and you'd pull that over your knees just to stay warm. They usually had a coal burnt, being burned in a brazier type thing underneath the table.

SZTUK: [00:23:02] Right.

AULD: [00:23:03] And but anyway, the woman would bring out the meal and it was always just tremendous, great, great food. At this point in time, for the last three years or so, I've been vegan, so I don't know that that would have worked as well these days.

SZTUK: [00:23:16] Now would you converse with the women or would they just come and serve and then disappear?

AULD: [00:23:21] I would talk to them, I would just basically say hello. And I did talk more with Mrs. Rezvani, who I got to know a lot better over time. And they would, they would share pictures when they would go to Shiraz or other cities in Iran. They would visit places like, uh, the tomb of Hafez or Saadi. I forget which one is in Shiraz, but they would go to, and these are great poets of Iran. Rumi is from Iran and Omar Khayyam and different poets that, um, they would show me pictures, they would take a lot of photos. And I would see that when they were away from their town, they would not have the chador on. The chador is a full-length black kind of a cape that allows the women to cover everything but their face.

AULD: [00:24:17] Afghanistan, you would see, uh, I forget what they call it in Afghanistan, but essentially you could see the eyes or actually it'd be sort of a mesh that you couldn't really even see the eyes. But in Iran, you could see the face of women and that was kind of it. But when they went to Shiraz, the chador would be, they sometimes would not have it at all. They would just have their regular clothes that are sort of Westernized clothes

or they might have it draped down so it's not over their head and that kind of thing.

SZTUK: [00:24:49] Hmm.

AULD: [00:24:49] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:24:49] Now, um, describe, um, describe life in the town. You said it was a town of about 10,000 people.

AULD: [00:24:59] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:25:00] So was it modern or were their homes modern? Were they primitive? Did you have electricity and running water and things like that?

AULD: [00:25:08] It had electricity and water. Because of the spring that fed the town, there was, everybody had water and I think everybody had fairly modern plumbing. The, the, um. So from that standpoint it was modern, yeah. And we did have the electricity. I learned recently that Mahallat has grown to a city of about 80,000 people or so. And of course this, the country of Iran has grown tremendously by millions and millions more people now than there were in the early seventies when I was there.

AULD: [00:25:48] Of course, they've been living under really difficult circumstances with the sanctions that, that our country has placed on them and that we've reimposed during the Trump administration, when Trump just decided he wanted to back away from the, uh, the joint, the JCPOA, which is known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, and reimposing sanctions has created tremendous hardship. Medical supplies can't get through, it's just extremely disruptive and really murderous to the, to the people of Iran now. But, but in those days, the town. So I said it was 10,000 people. So there were probably in that town, there probably 100 bakeries and 100 mosques in a town that size.

SZTUK: [00:26:37] Really?

AULD: [00:26:37] Yeah, it was, um. So the bakeries were great. I would stop every day and get fresh bread and I really put on weight in that year. And it was just great.

SZTUK: [00:26:47] Did you do your own cooking?

AULD: [00:26:48] I did my own cooking most of the time, except when I'd get a real great meal at some of these people's homes. Also, they had a few restaurants, so I would, I would go. And also I would travel from my town. About once a month I would go to Isfahan and meet some of my Peace Corps colleagues who were teaching in other places. Isfahan and Tehran were the main places I went, and I took a trip down to, um, oh, what is it? Kashan, I think. Shiraz. So I did get around a bit during that year.

AULD: [00:27:20] But in the town, so you had all these bakeries, you had all of the mosques. One of the interesting things that happened during a festival called Ashura, which is one of the holiest days in Shia Islam, that basically the entire town focuses on the, uh. I think it's, I'm probably going to get this wrong, but I think it's the murder of Abu Bakr or the murder of Hassan or Hussein. At any rate, every mosque starts a parade and they, for the most part, would slaughter a goat out in front and the blood from the goat would go into the tube or the little gutter that runs alongside the streets. And those gutters are all kind of washed out from the spring water.

AULD: [00:28:08] But on this particular year at Ashura happened in the winter. It had snowed the night before. So we had, I don't know, six or eight or ten inches of snow on the ground. And so the contrast with the blood coming out. And at each mosque, so you'd have a parade from every mosque going out to the cemetery that's outside town. And each, uh, each. There's a number of drums that are being beaten. And then a lot of the people would have chains that they would use to sort of lash their back and they would chant all through. So you would hear this sound. It was, it was kind of a, an unbelievable sort of a spectacle of, of life and suffering and, and sort of empathy with the martyrs. And they, and they would all kind of get out to the cemetery by a certain time in the day.

AULD: [00:29:07] But I kind of just walked along with them. I saw a lot of people doing this. And but anyway, that's all for what's called Ashura. And with the way it would work is you'd have the kids sort of in the front of the line and then the women and then the men. And just a long line snaking through the streets of Mahallat, going out to the cemetery. Actually, I don't know that I ever, had ever been to that cemetery. I only went that one time. Sometimes I would take hikes with fellow teachers out into the mountains outside of, or the hills outside of Mahallat. So.

AULD: [00:29:44] So, yeah, the mosques, the bakeries, the, uh. There was a bus station and I would take the bus everywhere I went. The main road between Tehran and Isfahan goes through the major religious capital of Iran called Qom. And so you'd, you'd come from Tehran to Qom on the bus. You'd get to a town called Delijan on that route. And that's where you'd turn to the west to go another 20 or 25 miles to Mahallat. And then if you kept going from Delijan, you would get down to Isfahan. So that's probably, again, I don't have this right anymore, but it's probably about a three or four hour bus ride to Isfahan, same thing up to Tehran, and would get there from time to time.

AULD: [00:30:31] I did go to the embassy up in Tehran a couple of times to get hamburgers and stuff like that. You could go and get a Western meal in Tehran. Of course that then, let's see, I left in '74 and it was four years later when the revolution broke out.

SZTUK: [00:30:50] Yeah.

AULD: [00:30:50] And five years later when the hostages were taken. So. Yeah. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:30:56] So you talked about being invited out to dinner a lot. People were very hospitable. What was their attitude towards Americans?

AULD: [00:31:05] Oh, they, they loved Americans. It was, it was kind of separate from the alliance at the highest political levels between the Shah and the Americans. You know, the Shah had been, had been essentially put in power through a coup. And not a lot of people talked about that at the

time. It's a lot more talked about now. But the 1953 coup, that was actually the British were in, were in Iran at the time. There was a, there was, there was a popularly elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, who, who, uh, I think everybody knew about him, but people didn't talk about him because the Shah was in power. People, uh, I would hear from my fellow teachers that they appreciated the Americans who had essentially helped keep the Russians out at the end of World War II.

SZTUK: [00:32:02] Mm hmm.

AULD: [00:32:02] But as far as person to person, I think this has stayed the same forever, which is that there's a deep love and respect for American people by Iranian people. I think that, that continues right through to today. And it's a, it's a big contrast with what, uh, what usually gets shown on American news outlets about the protests that are organized by the government that say Death to America.

SZTUK: [00:32:30] Right.

AULD: [00:32:30] And this type of thing. But, um, but, yeah, they, um, I don't know. I think that they, they were very Western focused. They were a secular state in a way. They were, they were actually an Islamic state. The Shah claimed to be descended from Muhammad, I think. It was, I think he was kind of crazy. But this was the myth that was created. And back in, let's see, just a few years before I got there, I think it was 1969, there was a major celebration near Shiraz in Persepolis, which was the ancient capital of the Persian Empire. And it was a massive, orchestrated effort. I don't remember if Nixon went there, but I think Vice President Agnew went on behalf of the U.S. But that was just a big spectacle. So that was only in 1969. So here it was '73, '74, and that was.

AULD: [00:33:32] I guess Iran was still living this myth of the Shah. And you would see in every shop you went to. There were also a lot of, a lot of shops, places. You had banks and you had shops to buy goods and different things. You could buy clothes, all kinds of things. It was a regular small town, very thriving, built around a farming industry because there were a lot of farmers who had animals or whatever that they husbanded

out in the countryside. But every shop had a picture of the Shah, just like immediately after the revolution, every shop has a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini and it just switched that way. But they were. There's a lot of history of Iran on what the Shah had done to confiscate land of the clerics, the people who were part of the whole Muslim Shia hierarchy within Iran. And so I was not too aware of that.

AULD: [00:34:35] I will say there was one time during the year where I met a person who was in the Iranian Air Force. There were, there were massive numbers of Iranian military people who were being trained by the United States. And so this person had been trained in San Antonio and had been, I don't know if he'd been there for a year or what, but he was in his mid-twenties. I would say a little older than I was. I was 21 when I, when I got there. He, he and I took this walk through town and just started talking and we had a, we had probably 30 of these kids following us. Like I was saying, any time I walked through town, I had this little entourage. But he. We all knew that there were protests happening in the United States against the Shah. That was happening in the early seventies.

AULD: [00:35:32] He said that his best friend had been taken by the Shah's secret police, which is called SAVAK, and was taken out into the desert and killed. So he was bitter toward the Shah, even though he was part of the Shah's military.

SZTUK: [00:35:49] Hmm.

AULD: [00:35:50] And this was, this was in '74 that I met this person. I only met him the one day. But when, when President Carter was welcoming the Shah and trying to maintain relationships with the Shah in, during his presidency, which went from '77 to '81, it was. I was always amazed at how little our intelligence apparatus seemed to understand the depth of, uh, kind of misery that the Shah was inflicting. I think it was just, well, we've got this puppet government in place and we need to keep working with them. And I don't know how that all worked from a diplomatic and foreign service level, but I was, I was just amazed at some of the blunders that President Carter made in trying to accommodate the Shah and be

loyal to the Shah when the Shah didn't really have the, the backing of the people. And that became evident during the revolution. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:36:57] You talked a little bit about teaching and the class structure at the school. Um. Did you spend all your time at that school? Did you have any kind of, uh, did you work with any groups outside of the school? Do any tutoring or anything like that?

AULD: [00:37:16] I was strictly at the school. That was, that was my job. And yeah, that was it. I. A typical day. Let's see. Friday was the holy day and the day off. We had school Saturday, Sunday, you would have full days. And then Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, we would have half days I think, if I'm remembering this right. And then Thursday and Friday we would have days off, or I might have worked half a day on Thursday. But the, um, but yeah. So all of the teaching was done, was done there.

SZTUK: [00:37:53] How did you find the students?

AULD: [00:37:55] Well, they were great. I mean, I loved working with the kids.

SZTUK: [00:37:59] So these were ninth graders?

AULD: [00:38:01] They were ninth graders.

SZTUK: [00:38:02] Teenagers.

AULD: [00:38:03] So, you know, you had these really young 12 year olds and then you'd have these really mature 18 or 19 year olds. And, and you just very different backgrounds in terms of where they had come from and their abilities. Just like in an American classroom, I suppose. I've never taught in the U.S. My career went into librarianship when I got back pretty quickly. So I've had a lifetime career in public libraries mainly, but um. So yeah, so I taught all the way through May. We went really October to May. I think that we were built around an agricultural school year.

SZTUK: [00:38:50] Mm hmm.

AULD: [00:38:50] So I think that when it was planting season, less students came in. And we didn't really start until after the harvest. So we didn't start until October. I was actually in Mahallat getting accustomed to things for maybe a month before we really got the classes going. So a lot of break time. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:39:09] Was English a required course or an elective?

AULD: [00:39:13] It was required.

SZTUK: [00:39:14] Required.

AULD: [00:39:14] Yeah. Yeah. So, so I would teach in the morning from, seems like it would be about 8:00 or 8:30 or 9:00 up until noon. We'd have a two hour break. So I would walk home, get lunch and walk back, and then we'd have from 2:00 until 4:00 or 4:30 each day. That was the normal day.

SZTUK: [00:39:31] Mm hmm.

AULD: [00:39:31] And if it was a half day, it might have been just go home at the end of, at lunch time. So there was a lot of free time. I ended up taking a vacation, expecting to come back in the fall. I traveled by bus through Turkey, Greece, and Italy in the summer. And then I mentioned earlier that I had had difficulty at home with both my mom and my brother having nervous breakdowns. Well, I ended up in the same boat. While I was in Italy, I had a pretty severe, um, I'll just call it a psychiatric breakdown, nervous breakdown. I was completely psychotic. I attribute it partly to genetics, knowing that I've had, out of four siblings, three of us have had some of these issues. But, but also the stresses of the year, the sort of the sensory deprivation. I had spent a year.

SZTUK: [00:40:34] In isolation, being the only person.

AULD: [00:40:36] Yeah, being the only American. I mean, the times I would get together with friends were great, but I really didn't see. I think there was one time in Isfahan where I, where we had a party and there were women, but I didn't really see women at all through that whole year. I had spent my

junior year of college in southern France, and I, and I. We had a group of about 25 of us from my college. And we were. One of the reasons I wanted to go to the Peace Corps was to have a more immersive experience. I was really immersed in the culture, but it was also, um, I was just so isolated. I can remember at one point my parents had been in Columbia, South Carolina, and I had maps. I had, had a, I had hundreds of books that I had brought over to read. I thought this would be a great way to read and learn and deepen my knowledge.

AULD: [00:41:26] And but I got this letter sometime in in the winter, and they said, they said they had moved to Fripp Island, South Carolina, which is kind of near Hilton Head, South Carolina. My dad was a golf pro and he had become the first golf pro at this Fripp Island. So I took out my map and I looked at South Carolina and I, and I saw Fripp Island and it kind of juts out into the Atlantic Ocean. And I thought to myself, here I am in the middle of Iran. I thought, oh my God, they're in the middle of nowhere. So. So, um. So, at any rate, after my travels, I connected with some of my Peace Corps friends in Greece, and I'd been in different parts of, I'd gone to Ankara.

SZTUK: [00:42:16] These are other volunteers from?

AULD: [00:42:17] From other volunteers from our English teaching program. And so I met them in Greece. And then we went, we went up to Rome and then, and then to Florence. And while I was in Florence is when I had this breakdown. So I was evacuated up to a German air, an American Air Force base in Germany, and then back to the U.S. and was sent to a hospital in Savannah, Georgia. And I was there for probably two months. I had shock treatments, a whole series of shock treatments. And that eventually sort of broke my, my psychotic cycle of thoughts and delusions and paranoia and schizophrenia.

SZTUK: [00:43:01] So you were with your, you were with friends when this happened and they contacted Peace Corps?

AULD: [00:43:06] They, they. I'm not sure if they contacted, I don't know how it happened.

SZTUK: [00:43:09] But somehow Peace Corps got you out of there.

AULD: [00:43:12] I don't, I'm. Somehow. I'm not even quite sure how I got out. I know that at some point one of the Senators in South Carolina helped to get me back to the U.S. I think that I was flown into Charleston and then driven down to this hospital in Savannah. After two months, I got back to sort of my senses and I was on some sort of psychotropic drugs for a month or two, and then I got off of those by November and haven't ever had any issue since then. But it was, uh, it was, it was quite the trauma because I had expected to be to be there, to go back. And so I had a really abrupt ending without having had a chance to say goodbye.

SZTUK: [00:43:59] Without going back.

AULD: [00:44:00] I never went, never went back. People are making trips back to Iran now, and it's possible I would go someday. But I have made friends since then, especially through the Peace Corps Iran Association, which just got going maybe seven or eight years ago. They had an initial conference in Portland in 2011 and I was notified about it. And then I connected with the Facebook group. And then two years ago, or three years ago, I organized the conference of Peace Corps Iran Association here in Annapolis, where I work. And that was great. And then I couldn't get to the San Diego conference that they had just at the, earlier this month. So I've been to one of the conferences. But being reconnected there, I've been able to reconnect with some of my friends that I, that I was closest to while in Iran. At least the American friends.

AULD: [00:44:57] Haven't really connected, I've had one message get to Mr. Resvani. He had moved to Tehran. So there's a person that I met through this association who is, he lives in Tabriz, Iran. But his son came to America to get a PhD in physics, I think. But anyway, he talked to Mr. Resvani and said he had been in touch with me. So I've had a little third party interaction. I don't know whatever happened with Mr. Resvani and his family. They were the ones I was closest to there.

SZTUK: [00:45:28] So, and in the time since you left then, you've never reconnected with any of the people that you worked with or?

AULD: [00:45:36] No.

SZTUK: [00:45:36] Students?

AULD: [00:45:36] None of the students, none of the. Now, some of the people from Peace Corps Iran Association have done that. Jackie Spurlock is the founder of it. She was, she was there in the years after. She got there '74 to '76. And then, and she, she was married at the time. She wasn't in Mahallat, but she then stayed on and worked for private company right up until the revolution. Actually, a couple, Charlie and Marie Mitchell, moved to Mahallat. They were assigned to Mahallat after I left. I left abruptly and I think they still wanted someone, but they got a couple this time to come in. And I've met Charlie and Marie and they're awesome. I met them at the Annapolis conference. They actually lived in the apartment where I lived and they got to know Mr. Resvani. And so, so I have a pretty strong connection with the two of them. They live in Arizona.

AULD: [00:46:33] But, um, I'd like to just for the record state the Web address for the Peace Corps Iran Association. That's Peace Corps Iran dot org. Because I think anybody who's listening to this who wants to dig in a little bit more will find a tremendous wealth of resources on Iran, on all the volunteers, on the conferences that have been held. There have been just, that website is a treasure trove of data and resources, so I highly recommend anybody go to that. So it's www dot Peace Corps Iran dot org.

SZTUK: [00:47:11] Okay.

AULD: [00:47:12] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:47:13] Thanks.

AULD: [00:47:13] Trying to think of anything else to, um.

SZTUK: [00:47:16] Yeah, well, your. So your story is a little unique in how your service ended but you did complete about a year of service. Do you think that experience of volunteering and living in another country serving in Peace Corps, has it influenced your life post Peace Corps in any way?

AULD: [00:47:41] Well, yeah, definitely. It's, uh, it. I kind of categorize that part of my life as two out of three years there I was out of the country. I was there for the, for the academic year in France. And I was, and I traveled all over Europe that year. And then a year of pretty intensive study, my senior year of college, I came back and I was, as I mentioned, South Asian studies and philosophy and I finished my psychology major. But and then but the year in Iran was so intense and so meaningful. And, you know, I've always lived a life of service. I went into a service field. I feel that I wasn't, uh, I mean, currently I'm CEO of a large library system. But, but I got into the field because I love learning and because I love people and because it was, it was a service type.

AULD: [00:48:43] It's really a public service field that I have spent my career in. So from that standpoint, yes, it's affected my life. I think that's probably why I went into the Peace Corps was much more of an altruistic, at least I consider myself that way, kind of person. My, uh, I keep a photo of Mahatma Gandhi in my office, just a little postcard of Mahatma Gandhi, and his autobiography that I read during my senior year of college has always been my favorite book. It's a touchstone book for me. And I'm not comparing myself to Gandhi, but I'm saying that I got into Peace Corps out of desire to do good in the world and have a positive impact. And that's been the field that I, that I chose. And then my. I think it had such a big impact on me because of the country being Iran.

AULD: [00:49:43] I think that I, for decades, I was completely out of touch with anyone who had any kind of a common experience. And so there's this association that has developed in the last ten years has been great because it's, uh, the Iran group was only in Iran. They were there. They were, they were the first group. Congresswoman Donna Shalala was in that first group to go to Iran. And then while I was there, our, our, my colleagues were talking about how the Shah could afford to pay living wages, and he didn't need to have the Peace Corps there. So by the time I

left, actually a couple of years later in 1976, that was the last year we had any volunteers there. So there's a total of about 2,000 people who served in Iran. We served in agriculture, urban planning, teaching, a variety of fields.

AULD: [00:50:42] And, uh, and yeah, so it's affected my life in certain ways. But I was also drawn to it because of kind of who I was.

SZTUK: [00:50:49] Yeah. All right. Anything else you'd like to add? Any final stories or memories?

AULD: [00:51:00] I could probably keep talking and keep talking, but I think I've said the main, the main things, and I appreciate this opportunity, Jay, so thank you.

SZTUK: [00:51:09] All right, Skip. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]