



PRAESES ET SOCII
UNIVERSITATIS YALENSIS
IN NOVO PORTU IN RE PUBLICA CONNECTICUTENSI OMNIBUS
AD QUOS HAE LITTERAE PERVENERINT SALUTEM IN DOMINO
SEMPITERNAM NOS PRAESES ET SOCII HUIUS UNIVERSITATIS
Hossein Ziai
PRIMI HONORIS ACADEMICI CANDIDATUM AD GRADUM
TITULUMQUE SCIENTIAE BACCALAUREI ADMISIMUS
ET IBI CONCESSIMUS OMNIA IURA PRIVILEGIA INSIGNIA
AD HUNC HONOREM SPECTANTIA



DECANVS ACADEMIAE SUPERIORIS
Burton Sparan Drexler

UNIVERSITATIS YALENSIS CCLXVI



Hossein Ziai

EDUCATION

EDUCATION

Early years through graduate school

Early Years

Hossein Ziai's education started in 1948 at age four at Kudakestan-e Shahdokht, a private (*melli*) kindergarten that he remembered with great fondness, and continued through fourth grade at its associated primary school, Gohariyeh. A progressive, co-educational institution with small classroom sizes, the facility was designed on a Russian model with well-equipped classrooms and playgrounds. Named after Shahdokht Shams Pahlavi, the school was governed by its visionary principal Iran Salehi, and taught by caring, well-educated teachers who instilled the love of learning in the students; special treats uncommon in Iranian schools at the time included documentary film screenings, piano recitals, and costume parties.



Kudakestan-e Shahdokht. Mashhad 1948



Shirin Ta'avoni, Shahbaz Moezzi, Hossein. Mashhad 1952



4th grade health certificate. Mashhad 1953

After school, Hossein—known as “Susu” until well into his adulthood—and a fellow classmate, Shirin Ta'avoni, would be hauled off in a horse-drawn carriage for private English lessons with Bernice Cochran, wife of American Presbyterian Hospital founder Dr. Joseph Cochran, Jr.; his language skills came in handy when Hossein was placed in nurseries and schools abroad during intervals when his parents pursued special education or training in England, Denmark, or the U.S.



Bernice and Dr. Joseph Cochran, Jr. 1948



Panda party. London 1949



London 1949



Panda elementary. London 1950



Red Cross Nursery, Denmark 1952



Washington, D.C. c 1953



Hossein Ziai at 10. US 1954



Poussi and Noushi Arkin, Hossein Ziai. Mashhad late 1948

In 1954 when he entered 5th grade at age ten, Hossein's mother transferred him to a public school (*dowlati دولتی*), Madresse-ye Nemouneh, and mobilized other upper-class families to follow suit and do their part to improve the quality of public education. Hossein found the separation from his old school unkind and the transition to a traditional, restrictive environment joyless. But the company of old friends and fellow Boy Scouts provided a thrilling outlet and made up for the slack. After moving to Tehran in 1957, he would go back during summer vacations and continue to ride, hunt, and enjoy outdoor excursions with his old friends in Torbat and further south, in Khāf.



L-R Hossein Ziai, Bahram Moeen-Ziai (back), Vali Sahami, Mohammad-Reza (Eddy) Soudavar



Boy Scouts oath. Mashhad c 1955



Boy Scouts games. Mashhad c 1955



Mashhad c 1955



Hossein in the outskirts of Torbat



Hossein and Mahmoud Ghara'ie. Khāf 1966



Hossein with Mahmoud (standing) and Hadi Ghara'ie in Khāf



Miniature by Ozra Ziai

At home, Hossein's father who was an extremely well-read and attentive parent instilled in him a love of history and archeology, and his mother's command and use of classical Persian poetry and remarkable talent in miniature painting, a lasting love of literature and art.

The schooling he received at home impressed Hossein for life. Growing up around his father's exquisite collection of 10th-11th c Neishapur pottery—Samanid through Seljuq—affected him in two ways. First, he became known in the antique shops along Khiaban-e Ferdowsi and Manuchehri in Tehran as the young man who collected pre-historic bronze rings, cylinder seals, and other small artifacts for their iconographic value, as well as early Islamic rings for their exquisite inscriptions. Secondly, the script, style, patterns, and animal figures prevalent in Neishapur glazed



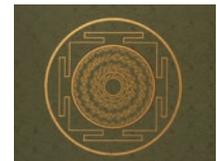
Bowl with Kufic inscription 10-11th c



Nishapur glazed bowl 10th c



H. Ziai drawing 2000s



H. Ziai calligraphy mid-1980s



Record 1968



Record 1968. Rumi p. 1

pottery inspired his sophisticated calligraphic mandalas later, and conceivably, his whimsical, effortless, and imaginative birds. Nor did poetry ever lose its relevance, spilling as it did into his personal journals as a lifetime habit, and enriching his exchanges with friends and family as with his students in the classroom.



Rumi pp. 2-3

In 1956, Hossein's father was elected to the Majles/parliament from Mashhad and the family moved to Tehran. Hossein started 7th grade at Alborz High School in 1957 where he concentrated in mathematics, took private tutorials with Zabih Behrouz on ancient Iranian history and Persian poetry, and enjoyed his new surroundings in the company of family and friends.



With Alborz friends Nader Ala'i, Khosrow Shahabi, 1957-58



L-R Hossein, Shirin Moshiri, ski instructors, Mina Rad. Tehran 1957



Hossein with Nader Ala'i. Abroad c 1959



R-L Abolala Soudavar, Hossein Ziai, Mammadi Soudavar at Ab-Ali, nr. Tehran



Hossein Ziai 1961



AFS exchange students stopover in Rome

In 1961, after completing 11th grade, Hossein left for the U.S. as an American Field Service student to complete high school.

He enrolled at Blake School in Minnesota where he excelled academically and added ice hockey to his athletic activities, tennis, horseback riding, skiing, and wrestling. Hossein earned his high school diploma in 1962.



Blake School newsclip 1961



Wrestling team (L)



Tennis team. Front row, 2nd L



Ice hockey at Blake



Blake School, MN notecard



Housing with American family



Blake School Class of 1962. Front row, 3rd R

College

Hossein's college of choice—the only school he applied to—was Yale University where he started freshman year in 1963.



Yale campus, New Haven

A resident of Saybrook College before moving to live off campus in New Haven, Hossein was tapped in his sophomore year to join St. Anthony Hall, a secret society on College Street originally founded at Columbia University as a fraternity in 1847. The Yale chapter of St. A's, established in 1868, identified as an intellectual and social hub that aimed to attract “the best and brightest of the student body” (and in 1970 was the first to tap women and break with the national fraternity). The intellectual and social interests that Hossein shared with his “brothers” at the Hall nurtured deep bonds of friendship that held unbroken for the rest of his life.



St. Anthony Hall. Dr. Mahmoud Ziai visit 1966

Another extracurricular activity at Yale that had a lasting impact on Hossein was the invitation to join the Elizabethan Club, a literary society where he met and was deeply impressed by the leading figures of the Beat Generation, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder, and Alan Watts among them. The exposures and exchanges enriched him with a wealth of poetry that he could recite from memory decades later, from Shakespeare to Robert Frost, Paul Valéry, Rilke . . . and Jacques Prévert (whose *Les Enfants du Paradis*, directed by Marcel Carné, was one of his all-time favorite movies.) In art and music, he gravitated to William Blake, De Chirico, Sibelius, and Koto music, and in film, to Bergman, Cocteau, Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, Renoir (*La Grande Illusion* was another favorite movie), and Satyajit Ray, to name the few that stood out in his later conversations.

As a science major who was passionate about math, Hossein supplemented Yale's outstanding liberal arts curriculum, events, and exhibitions with frequent visits to the arts districts in New York—Soho being his preferred haunt. The complement of classroom instruction and live encounters with artists and practitioners of eastern traditions led him to delve into Zen Buddhism and Taoist philosophy, and to reflect on similar notions in Hafez, Rumi, Nima, and Forough Farrokhzad in his journals.

Hossein also served as art and associate editor of [Yale Literary Magazine](#) where one of his contributions was to introduce readers to Rumi on the one hand, and to Iranian antiquities on the other. He was also invited to join the famous Yale Russian Choir, ‘not because he could keep a tune,’ he said, but ‘because he fitted the image!’ Be that as it may, he had a rich voice and could impersonate Nat King Cole, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., and others like a pro.



Hossein with his mother, Yale graduation 1967

In 1967, Hossein graduated from Yale with a B.S. in intensive mathematics and physics. He visited New Haven for the last time in 2007 to attend the 40th Class Reunion at St. Anthony Hall with his closest “brothers,” including Andrés von Buch, Jeffrey Stookey (who attended Hossein’s wedding in Tehran in 1970) and John Carter (who read Rumi’s *The Guest House* to Hossein’s widow at a St. Anthony Hall dinner in 2017 during the 50th Reunion of the Class of 1967), Tim Thompson (with whom he traveled across the U.S. after graduation and participated in a Navaho Sundance in Arizona), Babcock McLean, David Lippman, David Storrs, Gary Goodbody, John Baker, Philip Rosenthal ...



With Andrés von Buch at Yale 40th Reunion, 2007



Jeffrey Stookey with Dr. Mahmoud Ziai. Yale 1967



John Carter



Yale 40th Reunion 2007

Graduate School

In a break with family tradition that for several generations had practiced medicine, Hossein decided to pursue philosophy in graduate school. He started at Harvard University in 1968 where he first concentrated on learning classical Arabic with Prof. Ilse Lichtenstadter, Sanskrit with Prof. Daniel H. H. Ingalls, and over the following years, classical Greek, French, and German.



Professor Muhsin Mahdi with Hossein Ziai

Hossein's main adviser, Professor Muhsin Mahdi, who joined and later chaired the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures (NELC) at Harvard in 1969, was a University of Chicago Ph.D. (1954) and professor (1958-69). On his advice, Hossein took a leave of absence in the 1969-1970 academic year to travel to Iran and scour public and private libraries in search of unpublished manuscripts in medieval philosophy. While in Tehran, he met Mahasti Afshar; they fell madly in love, married in August 1970, spent their honeymoon traveling to Kerman, Neyriz, Bam, and Tabas with a few friends—Jeffrey

Stookey, Mehdi Khansari, and Gita Ostovani—in a Land Rover, and left for the U.S. in the fall. Their son, Dadali, was born at Mt. Auburn Hospital in Cambridge on 10 June 1973.



Wedding 14 Aug 1970



Jeffrey Stookey, Hossein, Gita Ostovani, Mahasti, Sept 1970. Photo: Mehdi Khansari



Dadali at 20 days

Muhsin Mahdi was a leading figure in Islamic history, philology, and philosophy, and well-versed in Western and political philosophy that he had studied with Leo Strauss. An authority on Ibn Khaldun and an author, among other publications, of *Alfarabi: Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, he advised Hossein to concentrate his academic career on publishing exhaustively annotated critical editions of medieval manuscripts, believing that the availability of such material was fundamental to advancing scholarship in Islamic philosophy. His advice influenced Hossein's future research and publications and proved to be invaluable to the field.

At Harvard, Hossein also studied Sufism and Persian literature with Professor Annemarie Schimmel, a German scholar of Indo-Muslim culture fluent in Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Urdu, and Punjabi who authored more than fifty books, among them, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Schimmel's interest in Islamic mysticism was triggered by Professor Hans Heinrich Schaeder who advised her to study Rumi's *Divan-e Shams* at the University of Berlin where she received her Ph.D. in Islamic theology in 1941, precociously, at age 19. In 1954, she earned another Ph.D. (history of religions) at the University of Marburg and went on to win many awards in recognition of her scholarship, including two of Pakistan's highest civil awards for her work on Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) who wrote poetry in both Urdu and Persian.



Annemarie Schimmel Nowruz card

Schimmel was also a connoisseur of Islamic calligraphy. She admired Hossein’s artwork and encouraged him to exhibit his calligraphy, which he did twice on campus. In spring 1973, she became godmother to Hossein’s newborn son and remained a close friend that never failed to send the family a special note on festive occasions.



The Heavenly Court (cover)

In addition to philosophy and mysticism, Hossein took interest in the phenomenology of religion, taught by Prof. Thorkild Jacobsen, comparative religions by Prof. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, philosophy of science by Prof. A.I. Sabra, *Theories of Light from Descartes to Newton*, Near Eastern archaeology by Prof. C.C. Lamberg-Karlovsky (who served on the Planning Commission for Reza Shah Kabir University, 1975-78,) and Persian miniature painting by Stuart Cary Welch (who published the Houghton Shahnameh شاهنامه طهماسبی with M.B. Dickson in 1981.) In February 1985, with the enthusiastic backing of Cary Welch, Hossein curated an exhibition at the Fogg Art Museum titled, “[The Heavenly Court: Persian Poetry and Painting](#),” complete with descriptive texts, introductions to, and his own translations of the poetry of Firdowsi (935 -1020), Omar Khayyam (1022-1123), Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209), Rumi (1207-1273), Sa’di (1213-1292), and Hafiz (1325-1389).

In 1976, Hossein Ziai obtained his Ph.D. degree in Islamic Philosophy from Harvard. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on Illuminationist Philosophy حکمت اشراق and its founder, the 12th century Persian philosopher, Shahāb al-Din Sohravardi شهاب‌الدین سهروردی (1145-1191) (Suhrawardī, in Arabic). In the following years, he produced his Ph.D. research as a monograph on Sohravardi (*Knowledge and Illumination*, 1990) and authored nine other books, one of which was translated into Persian. He also edited a new series named Bibliotheca Iranica, and wrote numerous book chapters, articles, and encyclopedia entries on Islamic philosophy with an emphasis on the Illuminationist tradition as it developed in Iran.



Dadali (2nd row far L). Rostam-Abadiyan, Tehran 1977

In the fall of 1976, Hossein returned to Tehran with his family and began his academic career. His three-year-old son was enrolled at Rostam-Abadiyan where the main language of instruction was English, while his wife who had obtained an M.A. (Harvard 1976) worked at the NIRT Folklore Center with Abolqassem Enjavi and taught oral literature and mythology at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tehran University.