

Cataloguing little big man : working in Bozorg Alavi's collection of books

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Bozorg Alavi / بزرگ علوی
(1904-1997)

Leftist writer and one of the most
noted Persian novelists of the 20th
century and political intellectual

Most important literary works:

- *Chashmhāyash* / چشمهایش (1952)
- *Panjāh va sih nafar* /
پنجاه سه و نفر (1943)
- *Varaq'pārah'hā-yi zindān* /
ورق پاره های زندان (1941)

Co-founder of the Tudeh
(Communist) Party in 1941

In exile in East Germany since 1953
Professor for Persian language and
literature at the Humboldt University
in (East) Berlin from 1953-1969

Co-Author of the best Persian-
German dictionary and of the most
used Persian textbook for German
learners in the 20th century

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bozorg_Alavi

<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/alavi-bozorg-novelist>

A few years back the University Library of Bamberg received through a number of unusual and lucky circumstances the private library of the Iranian writer Bozorg Alavi and that for free and without any restrictions concerning its use in our library which is important. Why did it end up in Bamberg and why did we take it? This leads us to the question: who was Bozorg Alavi whom I dubbed here as little big man (on this title at the end)? A few generations of Germans studying Persian in the 1960ies to the early 1990ies know the name from a grammar called „Lehrbuch der persischen Sprache“, one of the editions is shown here in its familiar brownish cover with the next picture showing the dictionary he co-authored with a philologist of Old Iranian languages, Heinrich Junker, in one of the many Iranian reprints.

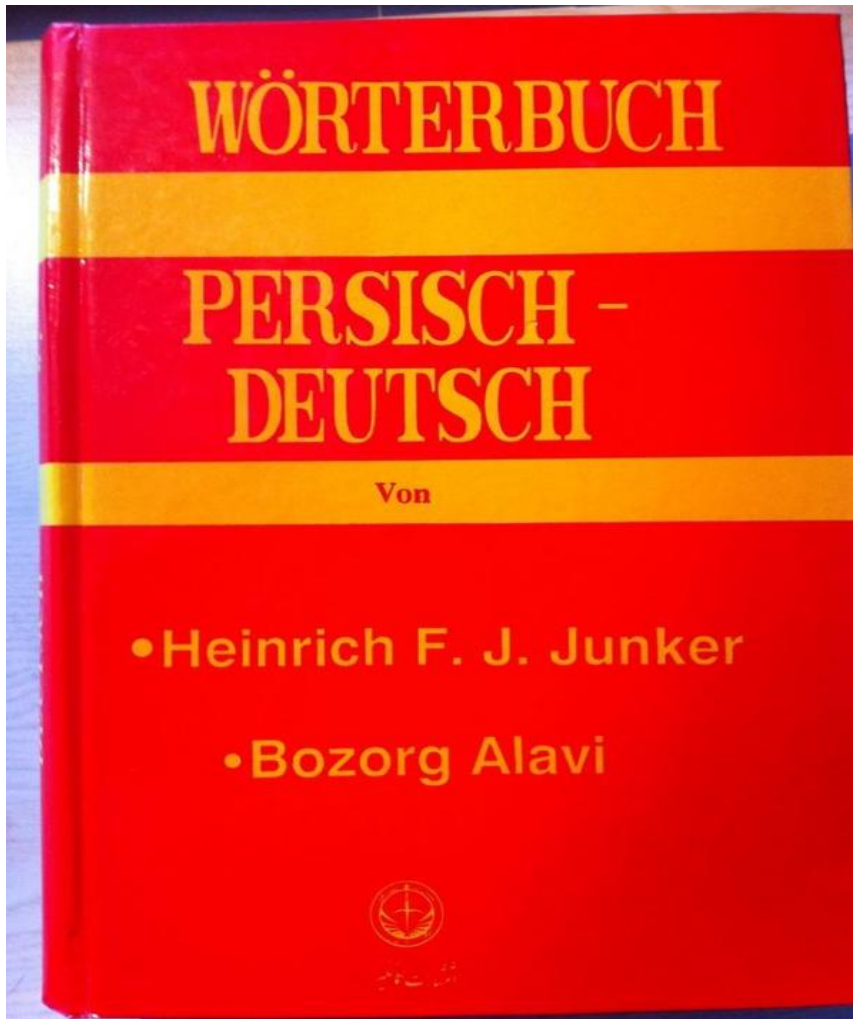


‘Alawi, Buzurg; Lorenz, Manfred:
Lehrbuch der persischen Sprache.
Leipzig 1988. 5. Aufl.



Preiswertes Angebot von [bgbl_buch](#).

[bgbl_buch](#) versendet alle Bücher weltweit.



Junker, Heinrich; 'Alawī, Buzurg:
Wörterbuch Persisch-Deutsch.

So if he was known at all in Germany it was within a tiny group of maybe 500-1000 students (me being certainly the most untalented of them) who had no alternative but this grammar. A completely different picture arises when you look at his role within the Persian literature of the 20th century where he is considered as a major Iranian author in this period. An Iranian literary critic with whom I had contact while working in these books compared him with Heinrich Böll, the German author who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972. So when I received the offer to take over his book collection I first thought: Should I really take over the books of the guy whose grammar gave me such a headache? But when realizing that I was dealing with a collection of a truly important author my own way of looking at the collection naturally changed. I have to tell you now very briefly on his biography.

Alavi was born in Teheran in 1904 into a wealthy family. His father participated actively in the so-called constitutional revolution (Mashrūṭiyat) and sent two of his sons to Germany for studying where the father co-edited the influential magazine “*Kāvah*”. Alavi studied pedagogics and graduated from the University of Munich. In this time he started already translating some German works into Persian and began his lifelong relation with German literature. After returning to Iran in 1927 he developed a friendship with probably the most acknowledged Iranian writer of the 20th century, *Ṣādiq Hidāyat*, and slowly started his literary reputation culminating in the 1940ies and 1950ies. From 1937 to 1941 he was imprisoned due to his Communist activities which led to one of his most famous works, *Varaq’pārah’hā-yi zindān*. He was involved in founding the Communist Party of Iran, Tudeh, a very important factor in the country’s history although Alavi was never an active functionary but supported the Communist cause through his intellectual work.

When the Anti-Mušaddiq Coup d'Etat happened in 1953 he was in East-Berlin teaching at the Humboldt-University where he then spent his further academic career and also became a citizen of the GDR/East Germany and then after the unification of the Federal Republic of Germany after 1990. Alavi briefly returned to Iran a few times after the Revolution but was discouraged by the chaotic and violent situation and went back to East Berlin. Due to his tense financial situation at the end of his life he sold his collection to an Iranian friend in West Berlin, Mehdi Rowschandel, and this combined private library of roughly 5.500 volumes is the one we are talking about here. About half of the collection proved to be either already present in Bamberg (within the Middle Eastern section we have a strong focus on Iran) or of no use, general dictionaries and encyclopedias etc. Approximately 2/3 was in Persian, the rest in German, Russian, English and all other European languages you can think of.

The part of the collection that we then started to work in proved to be of very mixed content as it is always the case with private collections. The majority of it is Persian literature and secondary material on it, in all aspects and mostly in Persian. It more or less represents the developments, trends and discourses of the 1950ies to the 1980ies. But intellectuals can be interested in everything possible and impossible, so politics, history, art, psychology, somehow esoteric material on the role of old Iranian civilization etc. emerged as well. There are only few precious books in this collection (e.g. a few manuscripts and lithographies) but overall I think it stands out as a good example of a personal library of a true intellectual and prominent writer. I will try to demonstrate the character of Alavi's collection now with some slides, pointing out some peculiarities and special features of it.

Humble beginnings in my office ...





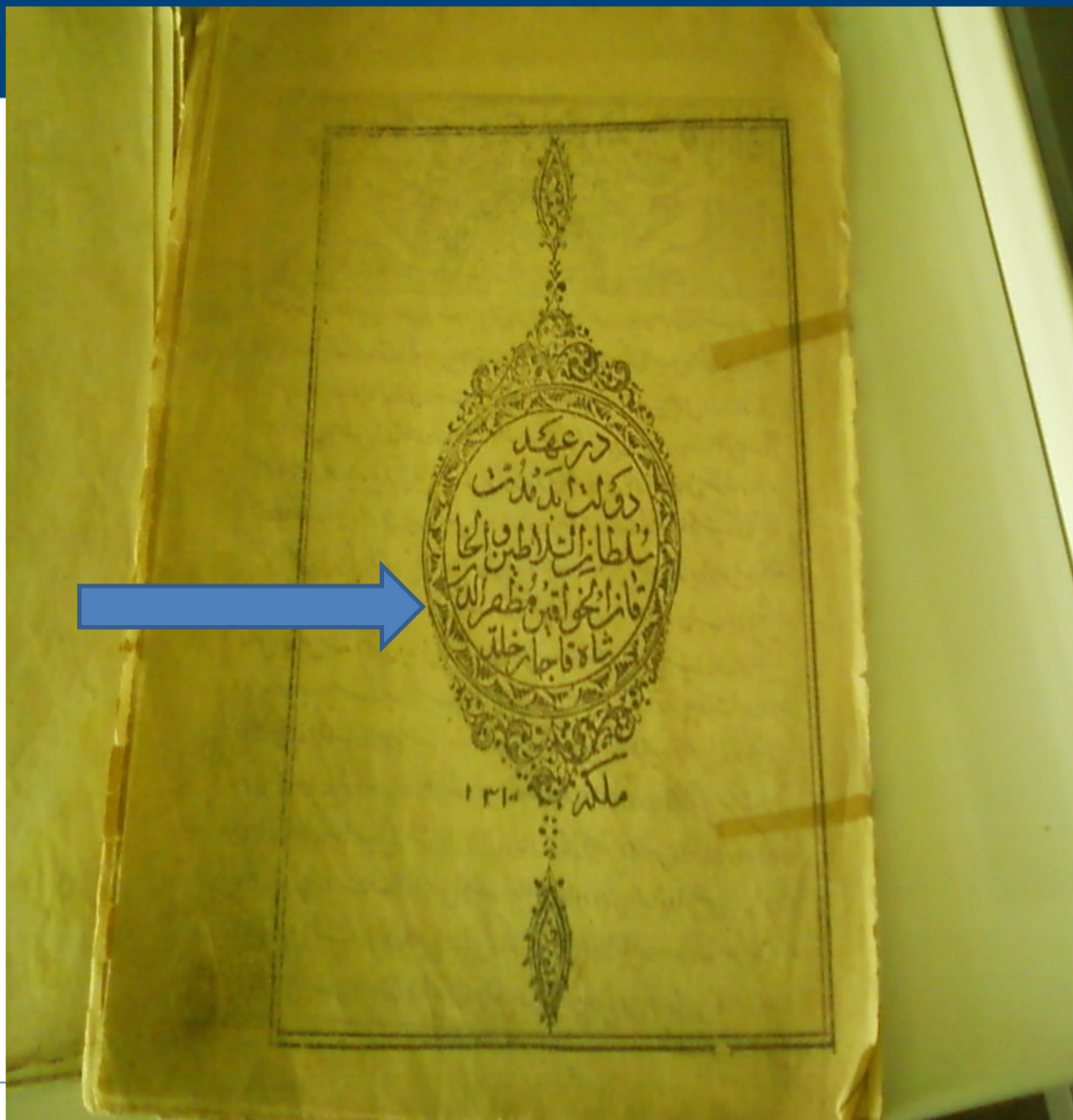
A few rarities:



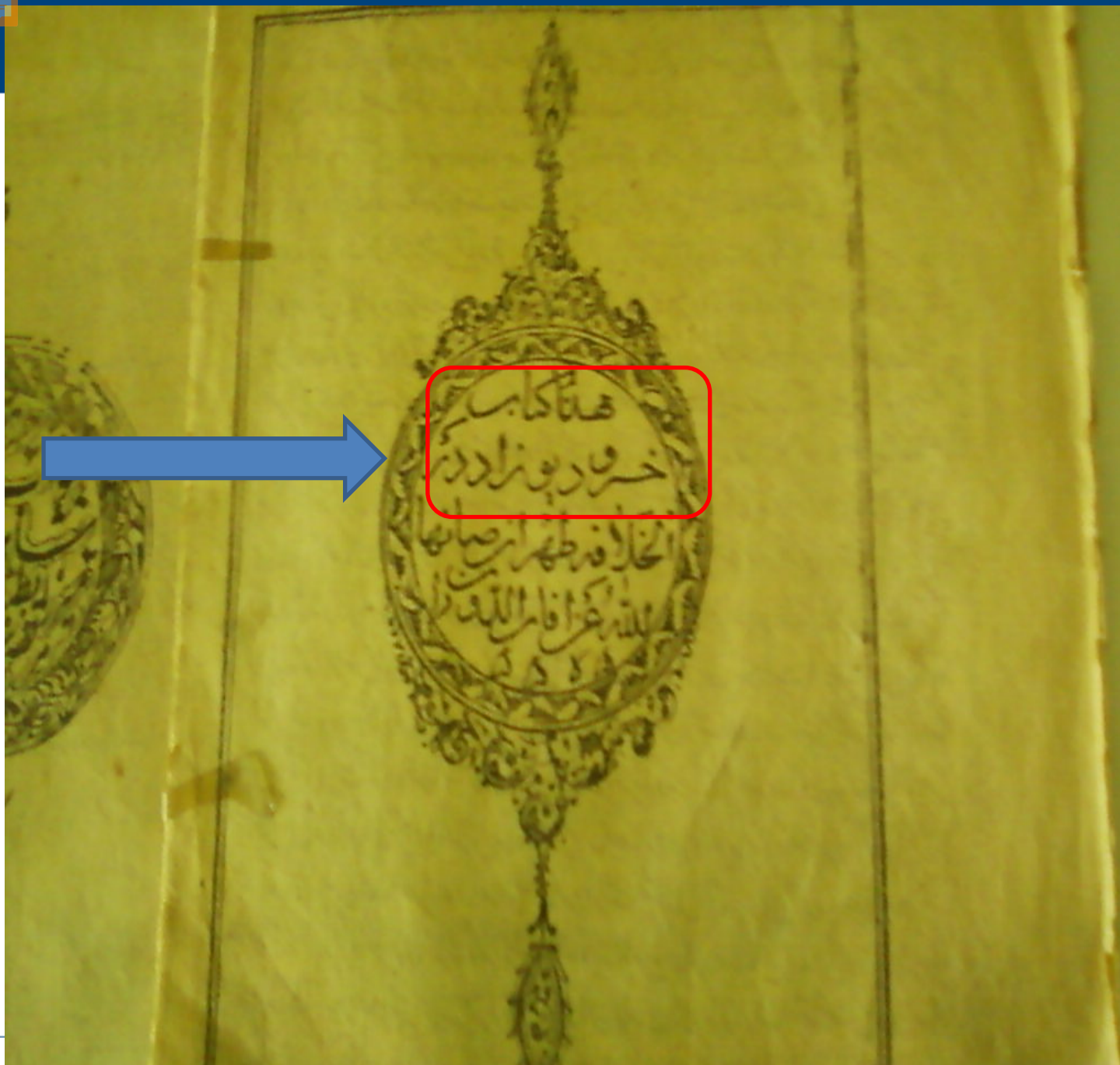
There are a few Qājār imprints which are altogether quite scarce and only rarely found in libraries outside of Iran. This one is the „*Hazā ḥikāyat-i khūsh-i 'ibārat-i Ra'nā va Zībā*“.



They usually contain folk tales or excerpts of the „*Shāh'nāmah*“ and hold illustrations which were the subjects of a study by Ulrich Marzolph a few years back [Marzolph, Ulrich : *Narrative illustration in Persian lithographed books*. Leiden [et al.], 2001 [Handbuch der Orientalistik / 1] ; 60]

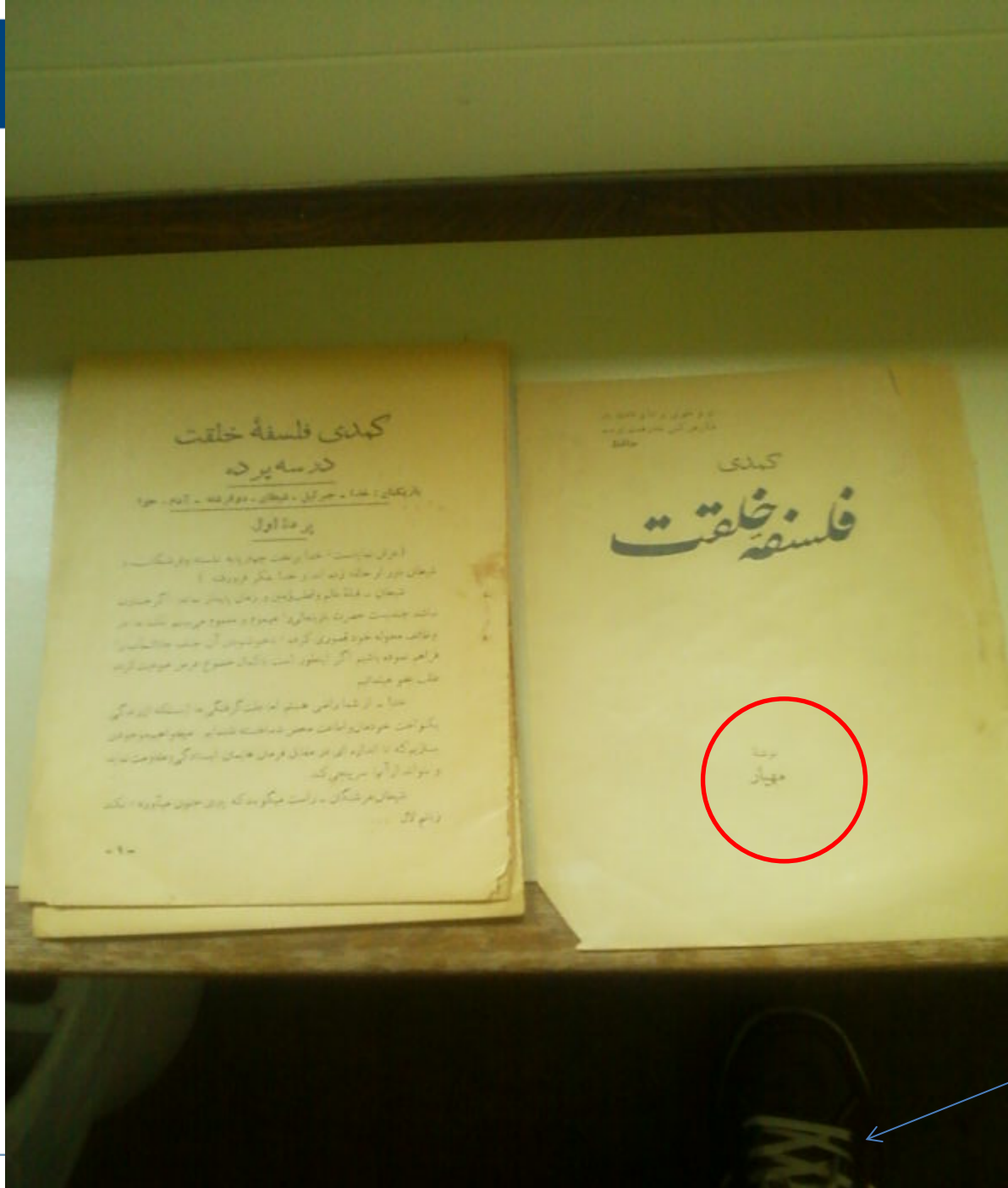


This one like many others was published in the era of Muẓaffar al-Dīn Shāh, 1902.



A world-rarity is this small booklet, called „*Hazā Kitāb-i Khusraw-i Dīv'zād*“ from 1892, its title only made known in the colophon on the backside.

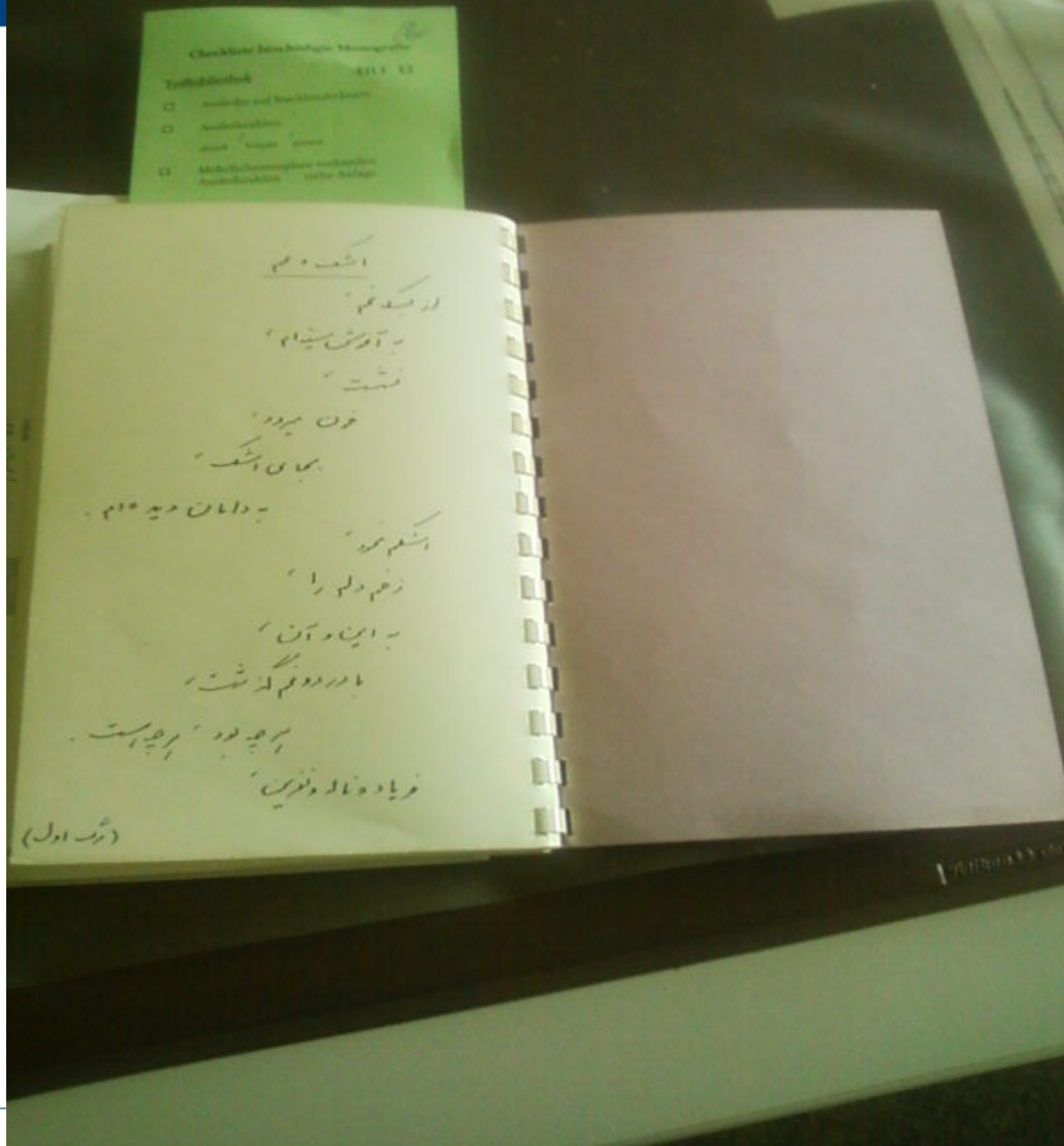
„Mahyār, Khusraw: Kumidī-i falsafah-i khilqat“, is another absolute rarity but in terrible shape paper-wise. Not to say that this is especially outstanding literature but its scarcity makes it, yes, a unique holding.

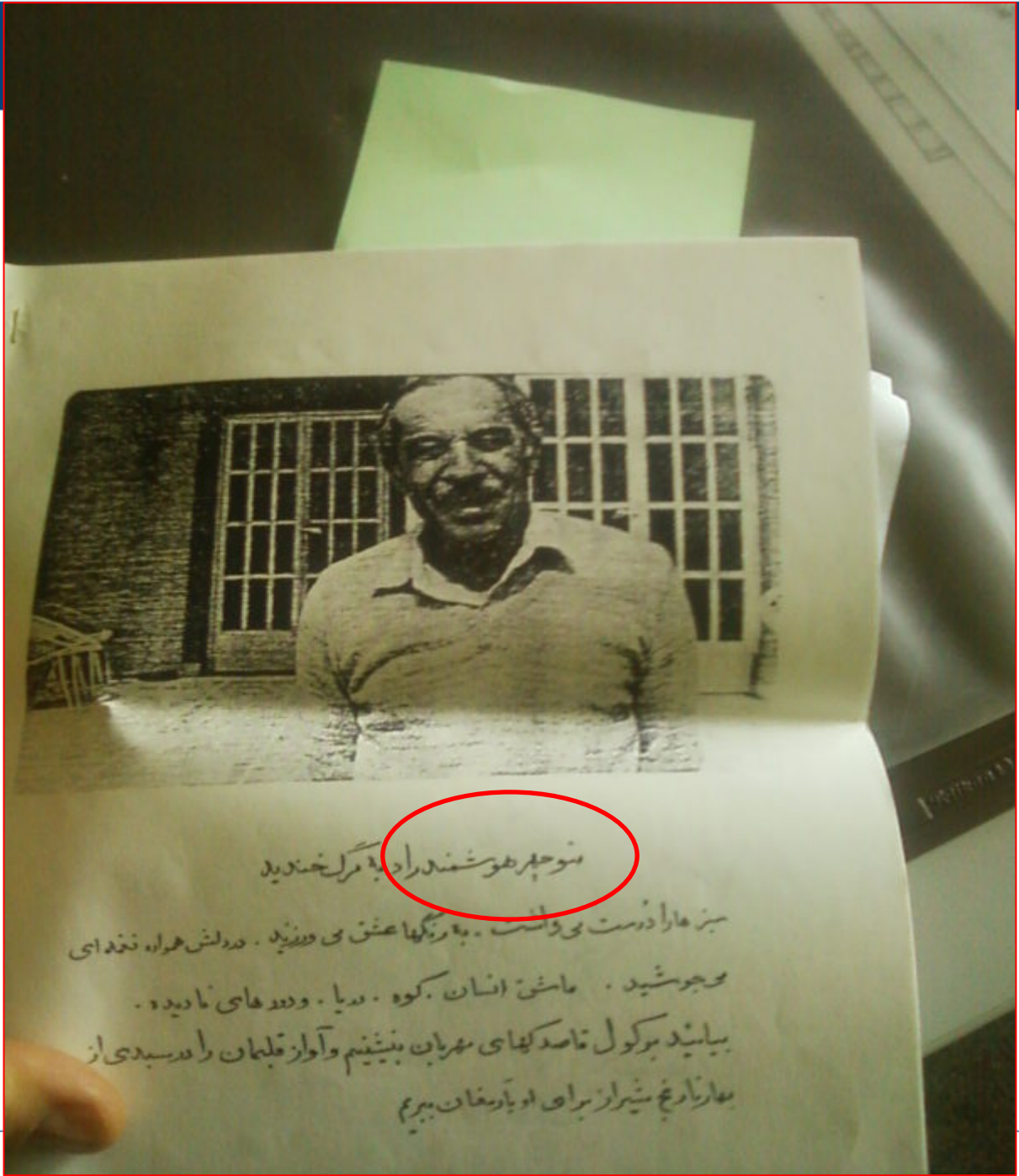


Not Bozorg Alavi's shoe!



Occasionally one finds books that were sent to Alavi to ask for his opinion on the quality of the planned work. One example here is „*Hushmandrād*, *Manūchihr: Daftar-i avval*“ who never really published his work then making this the only trace of the author and his literary ambitions.

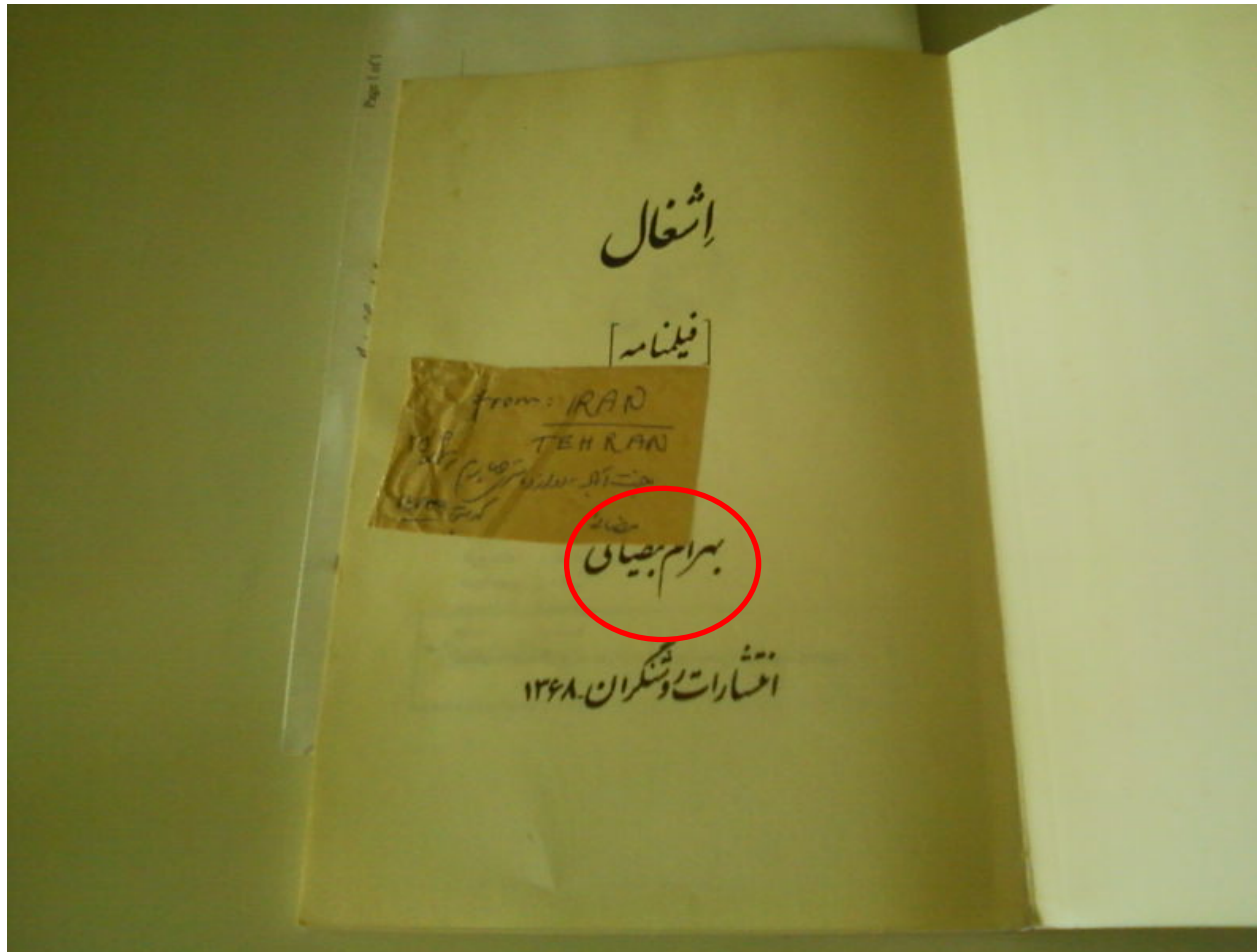




شوهر هوشمند را دیه مرگ خریدید

بیز ما را دوست می دانست . به رنگها عشق می ورزید . در دلش همواره نغمه ای
 می جوشید . ماشین انسان . کوه . دریا . و دودهای نادیده .
 بیایید بر کول ناصدکهای مهربان بنشینیم و آواز قلمبان را در سبیدی از
 بهار نارنج شیراز برای او بآویزان ببریم

Gifts and dedications from other writers



Very often befriended writers or authors unknown to Alavi would send their publications with dedications to him. Alavi usually glued the address somewhere on the frontpage and acknowledged the arrival. Here one work by *Bahrām Bayzā'ī*, *Ishghāl*.



مجموعه اشعار
ژاله اصفهانی

پروفسور ارشد - پروفسور مزود علوی
با محبت و احترام
ژاله
تبریز ۲۲ ربه ۱۳۶۰

Tehran, Tehran
طبقه سوم
ژاله

Sikr. 01A

اگر
هزار قلم
داشتم...

باغچه ای از احسان طبری

20140326

Another example of such a gift is this work of poetry by Zhālah Işfahānī.

به نویسندۀ بزرگ ایران و دوستِ گرانقدر خود :

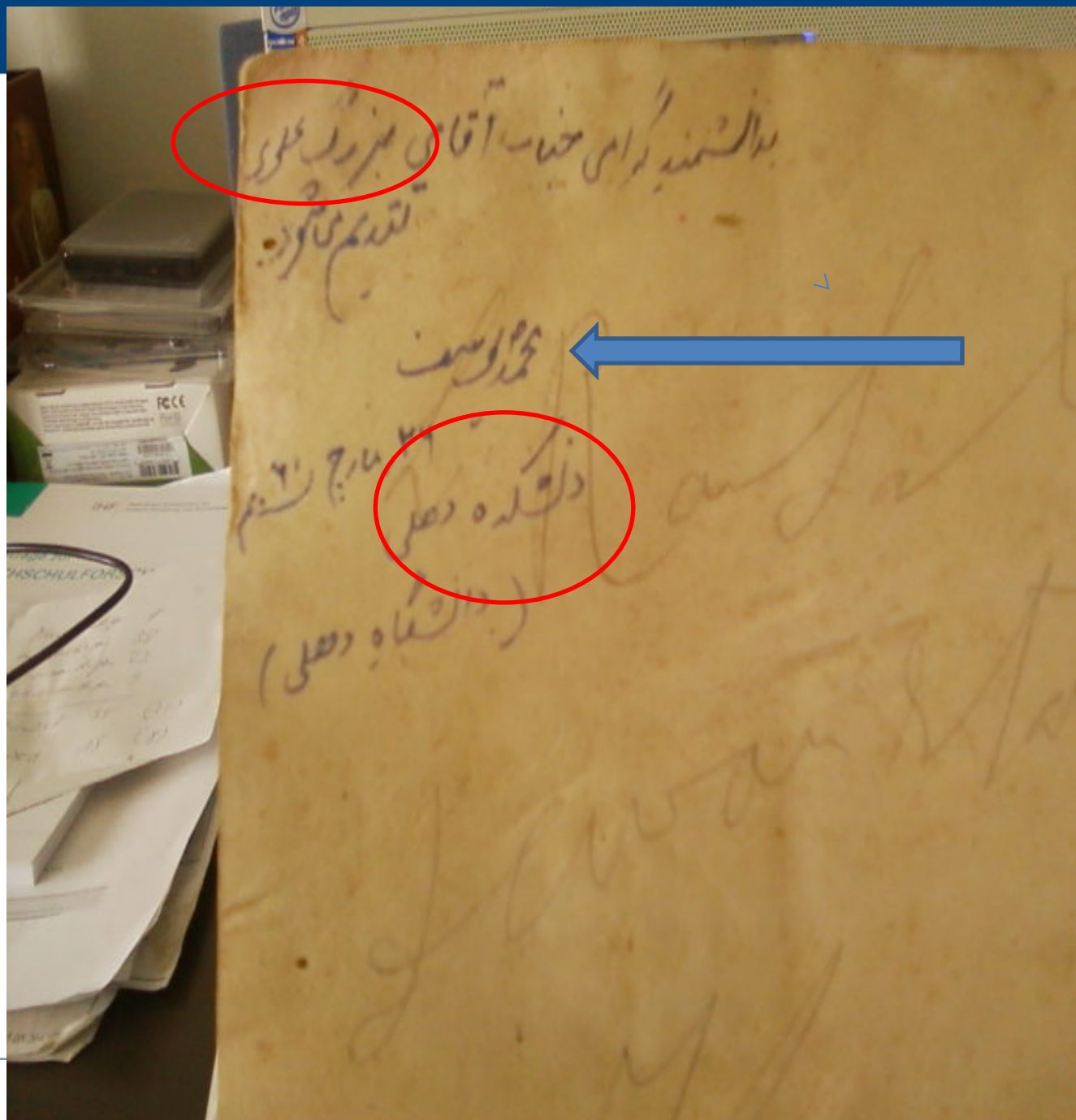
آقای بزرگ علوی ، سپاسگزارانه ارمغان می‌کنم.
 لوس آنجلس - ۲۹ آبان ماه ۱۳۶۶ نادر نادرپور

FALSE DAWN

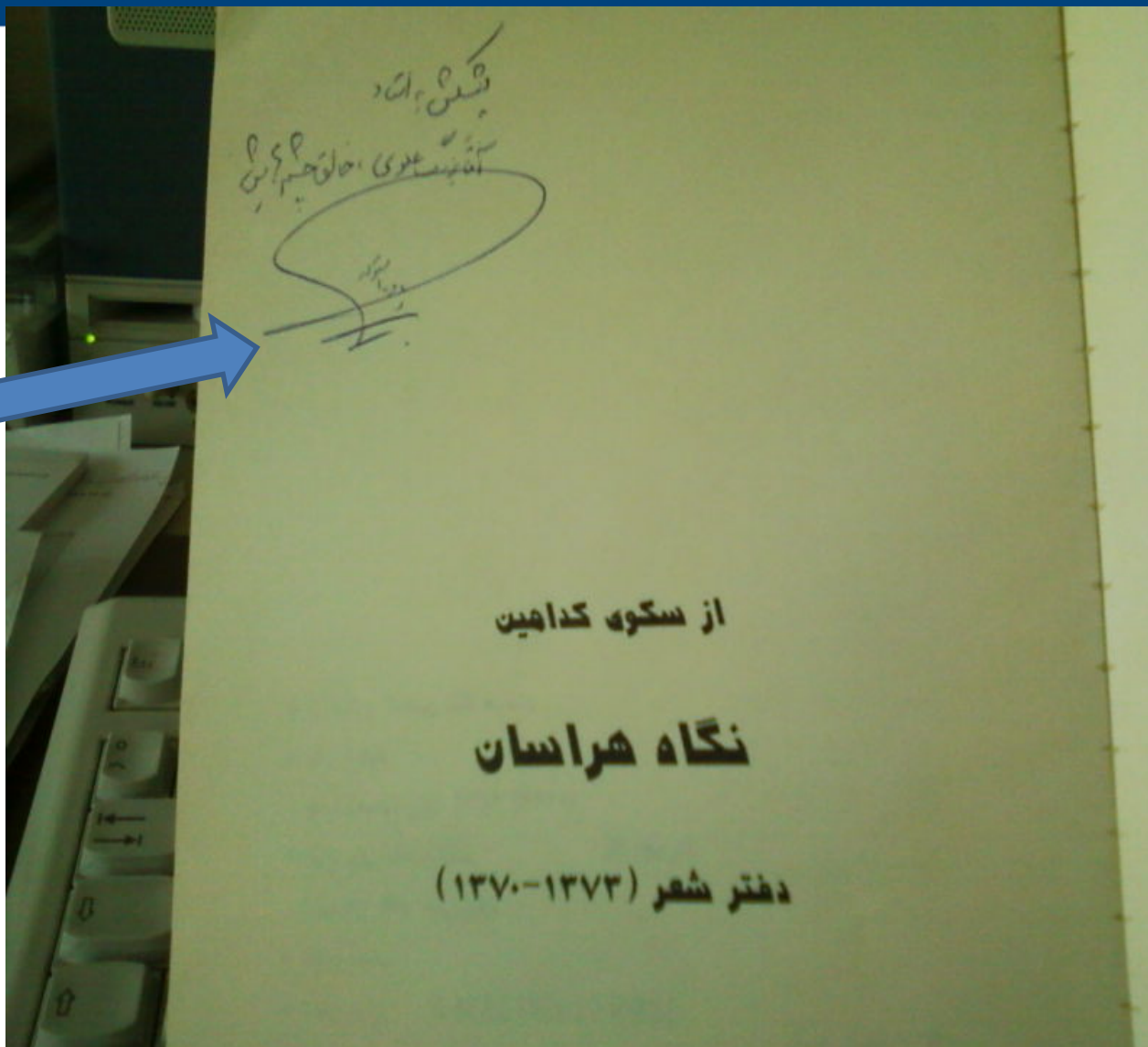
Persian Poems (1951-1984)
 by Nāder Nāderpour

introduction and translations by Michael Craig Hillmann
 afterword by Leonardo P. Alishan

A collection of poetry
 by Nādir Nādirpūr,
 very clear handwriting
 and his Tughrā-sort of
 signature!



Lots of unknown personalities appear with their gifts as well like this Muhammad Yūsuf from the University of Delhi, presenting a beautiful copy of *Amīr Khusraw's Kulliyāt, Kānpūr, 1910*, to Alavi.



???

A lot of signatures in these dedicated works remain unreadable to me, though, e.g. this one.

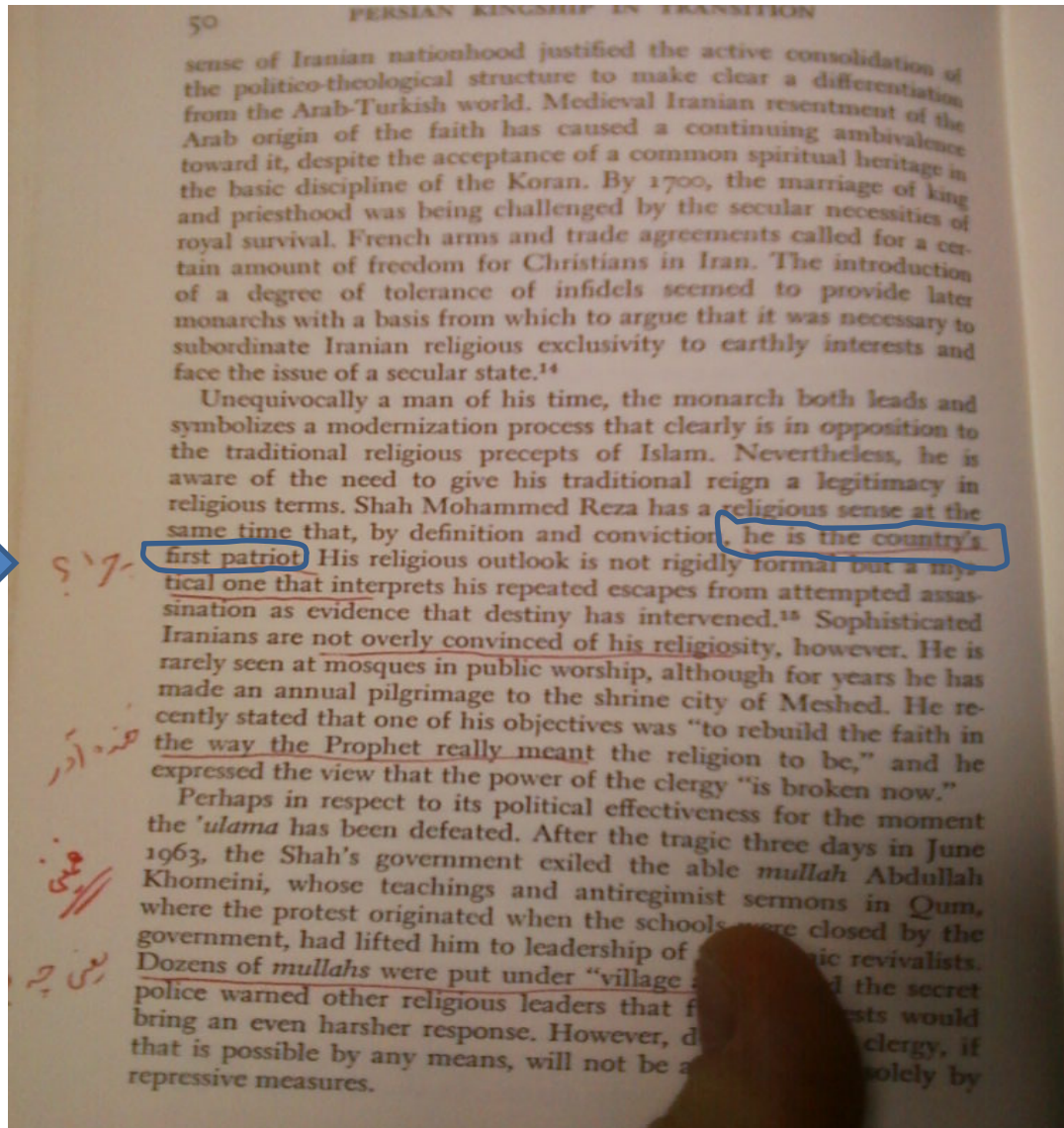
Persian Kingship in Transition

Conversations with
a Monarch Whose Office Is Traditional
and Whose Goal Is Modernization

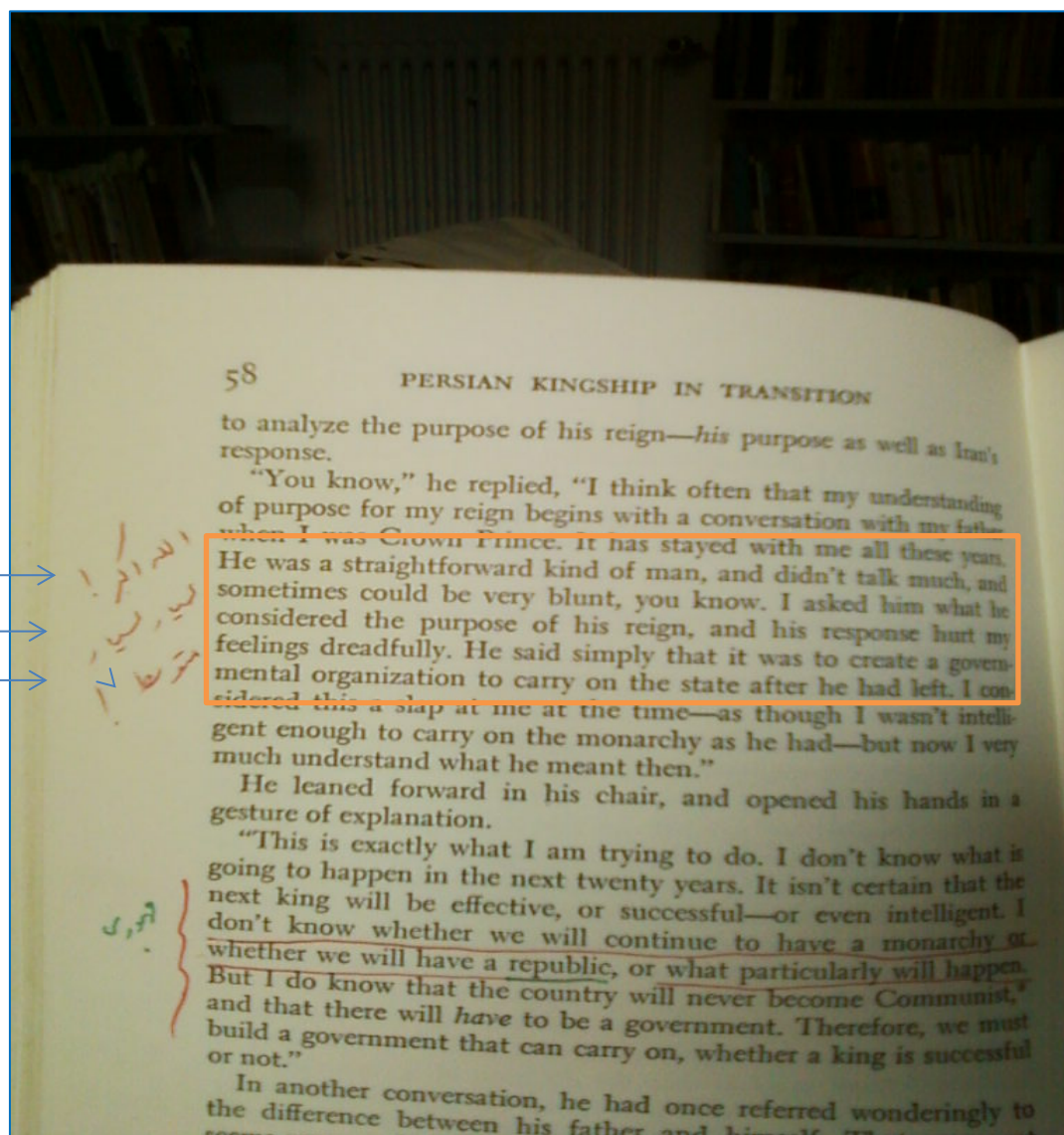


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535 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

A particular interesting case are his remarks in books commenting on the Pahlavis or describing them in a very favourable way like this title by „Edward Bayne, *Persian kingship in transition*, New York 1968“. He was a staunch opponent of the Pahlavis and despised them wholeheartedly.



He questioned many of the assumptions with his own comments like this one here: „he [Muḥammad Riḏā Shāh] is the country's first patriot“ leading Alavi to remark: „chirā“ – why?



More of the comments here:

„Allahu akbar“ and „bisyār bisyār“ [very much] (on the nature of Riḏā Shāh) and „mutavassit“ [mediocre] (on the purpose of his rule)



GESCHICHTE
DER KOMMUNISTISCHEN PARTEI
DER SOWJETUNION
(BOLSCHEWIKI)

KURZER LEHRGANG

As a communist he tried for a while to adapt the official party line with the historical development in Iran like this official history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from the era of Stalin, where he left notes comparing it with the 1905 revolution in Iran.

م. ا. به آذین

محرز مار

Another interesting thing are his comments on works by prominent authors, contemporary to himself like this one by *Muḥammad Bih'Āzīn*.

گره کور

بیدار شده بود. میبایست دردها را بستند، بستند، نه بدان سبب که
 نشئه بود و کله آب بیخ به لبانش چسبیده بود، بلکه از آن دو که میخواست
 بیت هنگام سحرش را باطل سازد و از یک بیوند عظیم شانه خالی کند...
 طلعت کله را از دست شوهرش، اگر بتوان گفت، قایمید و آب را
 با جرعه های بلند تاته سر کشید. آرامشی وجودش را فرا گرفت. پالیند
 نازکی که غرور یک پیروزی دشوار در آن میدرخشید، کله را بدست
 شوهر داد. پس از آن کمی بچهدا در بغل گرفت و بپاخواست:

- بریم، دیگر حالم جای آمده.

قاسم بچهدا از او گرفت و به راه افتاد. پس از چند قدم پرسید:

- چی بود، آخر، نگفتی...

- چی بایست باشه؟ گفته تا دو هفته کاریست.

قاسم حرکتی نکرد. فقط رنگ تیره اش باز تیره تر شد و پلکهایش
 بهم خورد. پس از دو قدم، آهسته، مانند کسی که با خود حرف بزند
 گفت:

- حالا شدیم دوتا...

قاسم که بیخون از روی سرش میزد و کله را در دست
 میزد، گفت: دراز از یک بزرگ، طلعت قاسم میگ
 گفت، سبب منور طلعت، رنگ رویم بیخون شد
 از روی این ای گفته، قاسم تیره شد
 در شام روز ۲

Here at the end of a chapter you find his individual opinion on the quality of the work, offering highly unusual insights into the interpersonal relationships of the writers.

مرد دست زن رها کرد. مرد مرا نشان داد و گفت :
- بروا در این دریا صدف بودی، گوهر باش.

زن رو بر گرداند و به خود لرزید. درویش، ریش و کیسوی فرو
رفته سفید، اما سیل و ابرو بیشتر سیاه، باد و چشم شرر بار چون العاس
گاهش میکرد.

خواست چیزی بگوید. اما دهانش بازماند و ناله‌ای در گلویش
بست.

درویش با قلمت بر افراشته دور شد. دور شد. تا چنان که گوئی دود شد
ش برد.

زن به کاخ رفت.

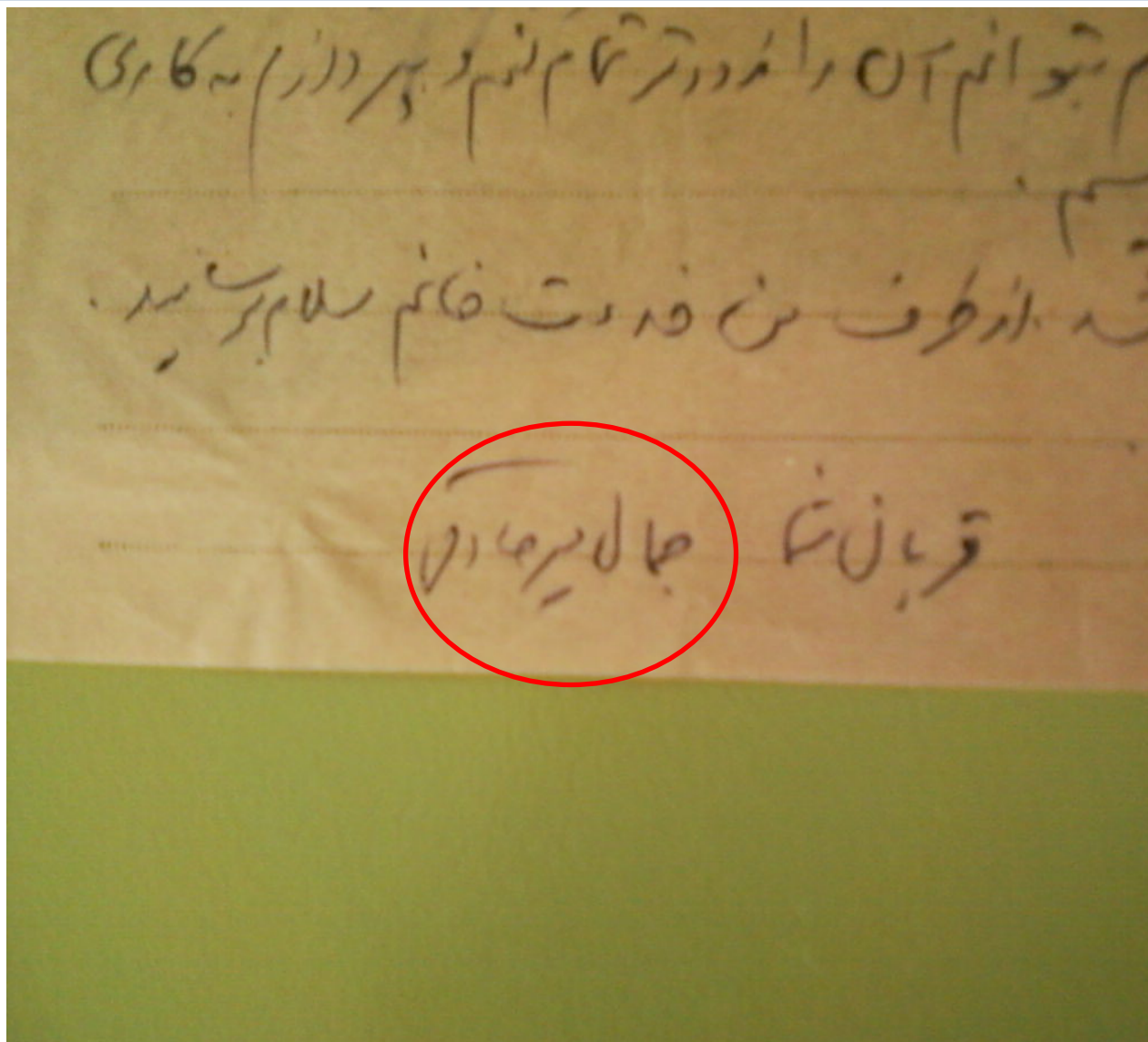
12. Aug. 68

در درویش زندگی تازه‌ای می‌جیبید.

Fleming waribel

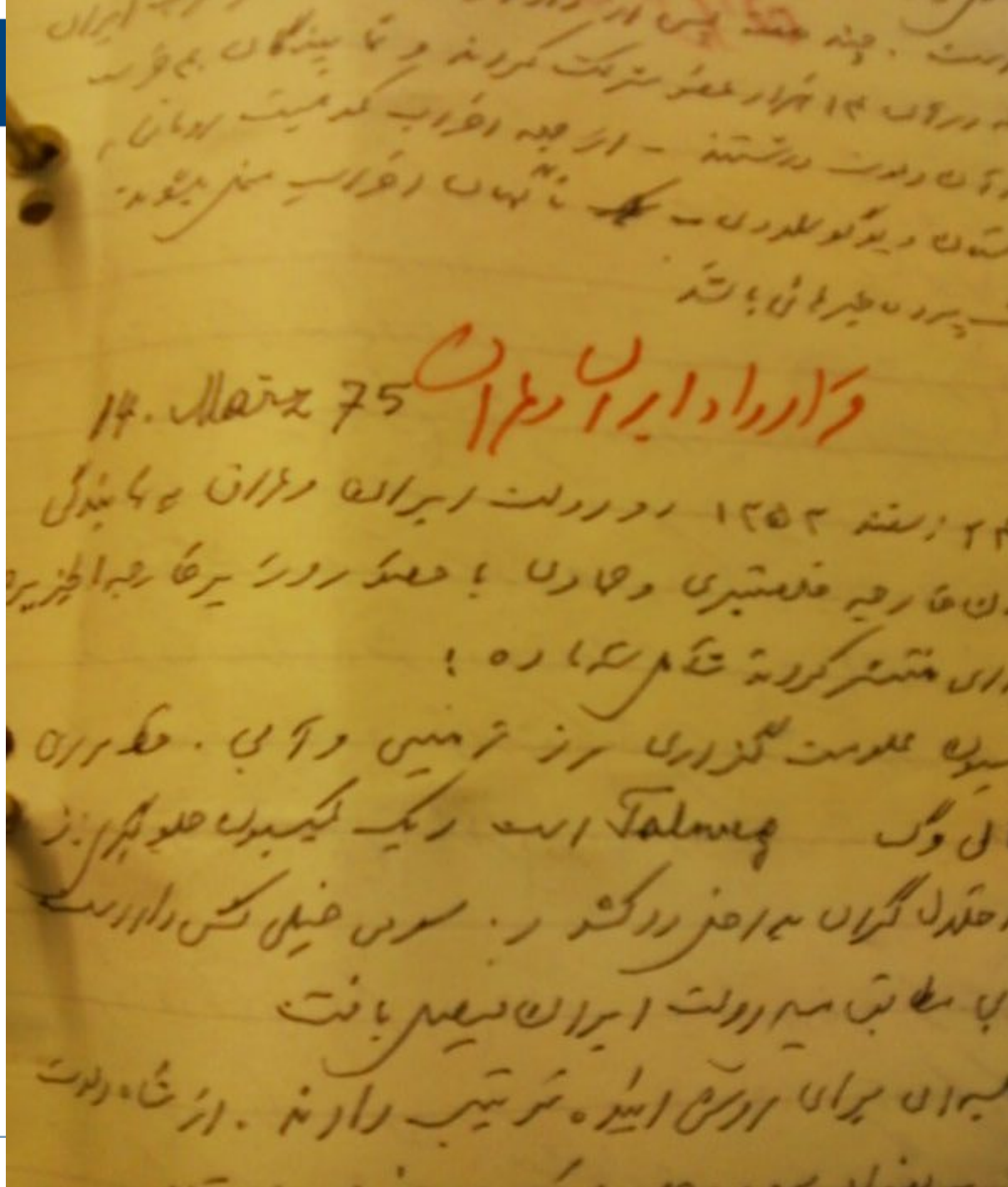
Be Ende gelassen.

Very often Alavi
left remarks
when and where
he finished
reading the books
like here with
Bih'Āzīn's work.



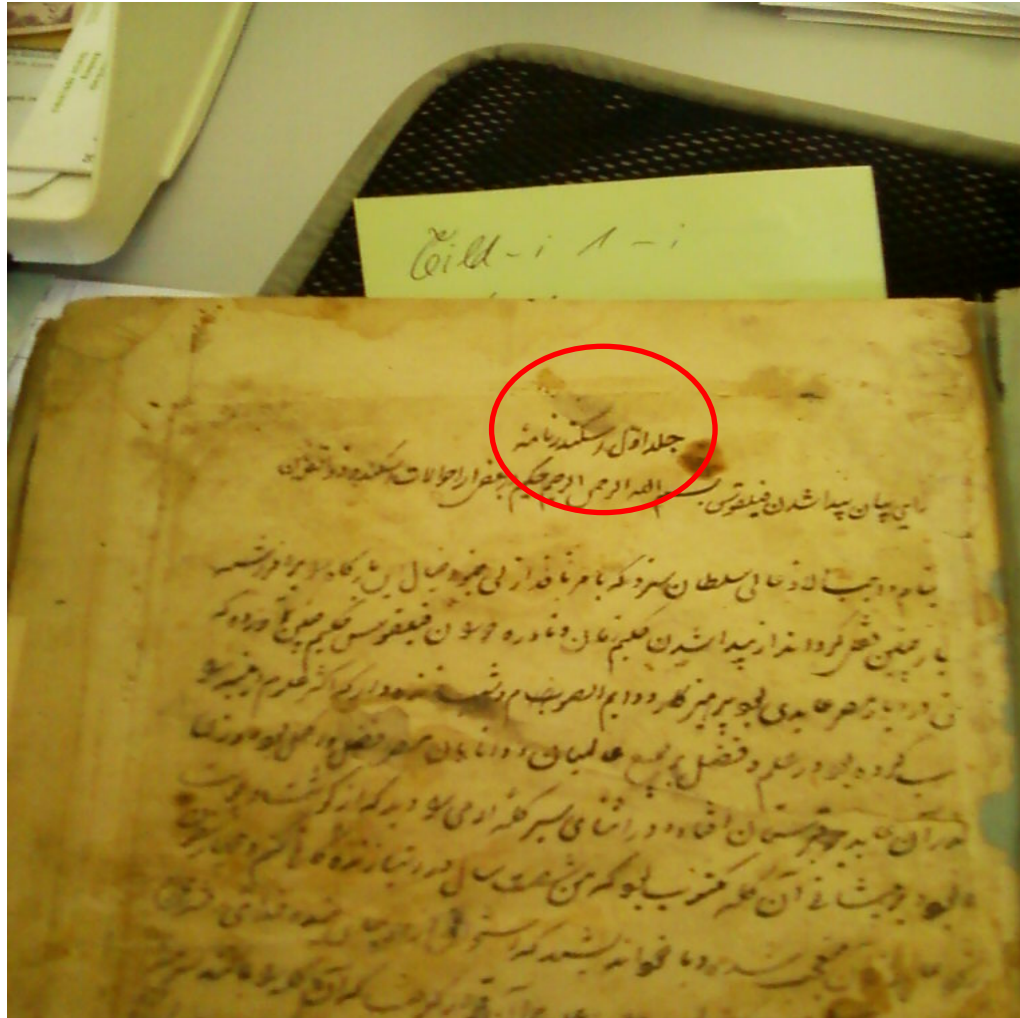
Signature by
Jamāl Mīr
Ṣādiqī

The one missing volume of Bozorg Alavi's diary was found as well, covering the period of 12/1971 to 3/1975. The other ring binders are already in the Archive of the Humboldt University Berlin where this one will be sent as well.



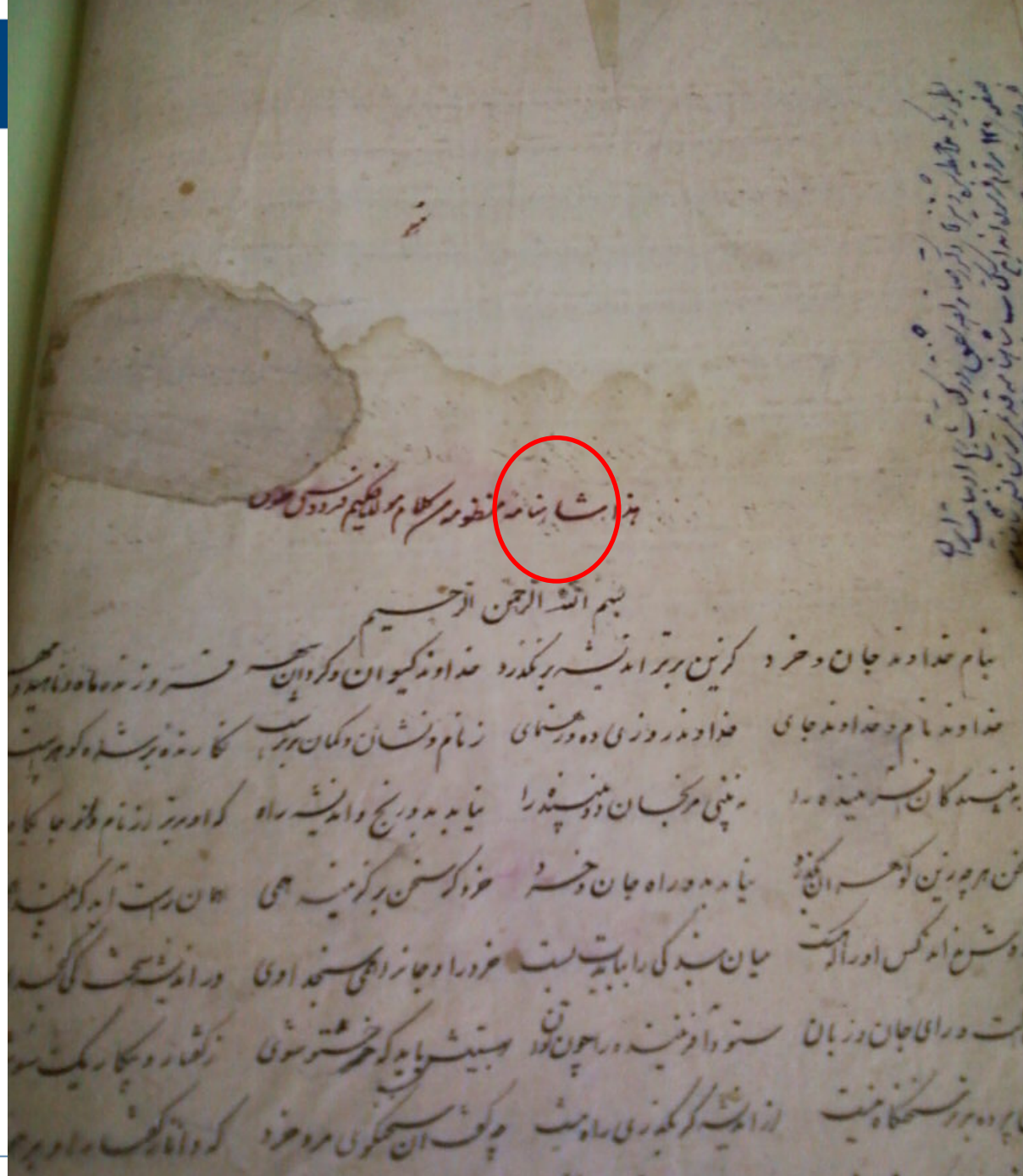
One of the pages of this volume of Alavi's diary.

Manuscripts



There are a few manuscripts in Alavi's collection. An interesting one is this collection of „*Iskandar'nāmahs*“ (not Nizāmī's *Iskandar'nāmah*!).

A manuscript of the „*Shāhnāmah*“ is present at well, a rather late manuscript from the Qājār period which could be studied and compared in its textual variations.



So describing the Alavi/Rowschandel collection as it was means also to confess that it never will be like this again because I ripped it into pieces: The letters will go to the Archive of the Humboldt University in Berlin because they took over most of his letters and the volumes of his diaries that were known so far. So naturally and quickly I agreed with the head of the Archive that everything we find in letters and notes goes to them and they even have established a finding aid as well. And concerning the books: I am working in a library which faces severe shortage of space so I cannot take in duplicates meaning: A lot of them do end in a paper bank as hard as it is while some get exchanged with partner libraries. The remaining half is worked in normally and easily identifiable over it separate position shelf mark as shown here.

Everything is open for regular use so it is not a museum-like collection within the library and I am certainly not the curator of little big man's books. And why this title?

Why little big man?



کوچک مرد بزرگ

Because one of his biographers, Bāqir Mu'minī, labelled him like this: **Kūchik-i mard-i buzurg** [*Mu'minī, Bāqir: Rāhīyān-i khaṭar / Ceux qui bravent le danger. Paris : Khavaran, 2006*].