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# A GIFT OF GOD WORKED BY HEROES

## How on Earth?

Like many westerners, when I landed in Azerbaijan 25 years ago, my mindset was not overly enthusiastic about the oil industry: dirty, polluting, planet-destroying etc. And my job was to become mainly teaching potential recruits enough English to function in that very industry. One aspect of the task was to get Azerbaijani engineers from (often) zero to functional working English in six months. It was the most fulfilling language teaching I've done. If the guys made the grade, they got a contract, gold standard employment for those times in their developing, newly-independent again, country. To see 40-50-year-old men, some of whom hadn't been in a classroom for 20 or 30 years, driving themselves to linguistic efficiency, was downright inspiring.

While most sessions were in a training centre where oil from the Caspian Sea flowed onshore, some, in 2001, were at the production site - on a platform out on the sea, actually the world's largest lake. The helicopter flight out there was notable for two reasons: shortly af-

ter take-off, the surprise on looking down and seeing a seemingly endless straggle of causeways criss-crossing the waters. Then the gasp from this non-engineer on stepping onto the platform's helipad. "How on earth did they build this? Here!?" 120 kilometres from Baku in waters 120 metres deep. A tour of the workings, of course in strict compliance with HSE regulations, only increased the sense of awe and respect.

## An itch...

Later, back on solid earth, the memory of those causeways itched away in curious brain cells. Learning that they were part of *Neft Dashlari*, aka Oil Rocks, whose construction began in 1949, the urge grew to see and learn more. I also believed it would help teachers working with the oil workers to better understand the work and conditions their students would tackle and what language they needed to be effective.

Understandably considering the safety implications, the state oil company, SOCAR, finally gave a small party of us permission to visit in 2007.

According to the Guinness Book of Records, the world's oldest offshore oil platform is 40 kilometres from the Azerbaijani 'beak' that juts into the Caspian, and so this was just a 12-minute helicopter ride onto one of the surviving causeways. Some 50% of the original 200+ kilometres had not survived the trepidations of often ferocious weather conditions and a failing Soviet economy. But productive Oil Rocks still is.

As we landed, we were met by a minibus to take us over the stilted roadway to the 'centre'. More amaze-

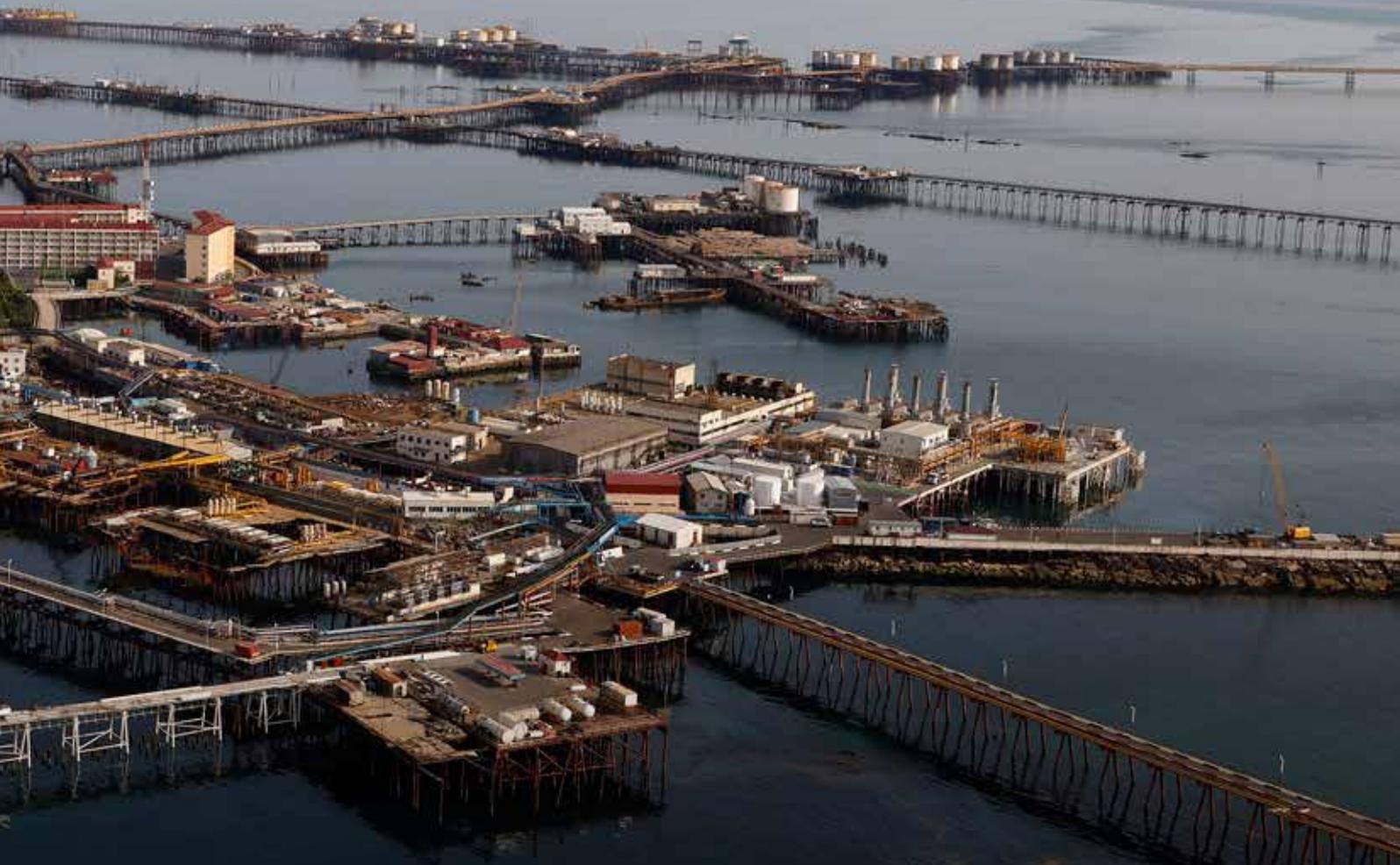
ment as we alighted in front of a nine-storey apartment block, accommodation for the 2,000 or so workers on their fortnightly shift. Really? Basically built on rock and stilts? Or the Heydar Aliyev Park? Trees, grass, birds and benches for relaxation on good days? And, of course, the bakery, to supply the daily fresh bread required by every sentient Azerbaijani.

### Heroes

The museum filled us in on the history. Exploration had begun in 1948 in conditions that are barely con-

ceivable. With no land to build on, apart from a small, rocky ridge jutting from the waves, a team of workers led by Shamakha-born Mikhail Kaverochkin somehow produced a gusher late in 1949. Chasing the reservoirs, they stretched out further and further for another eight years. Their struggle to extract the Earth's riches continued until 1957, when they came up against the elements at full throttle, a November-night storm overwhelming the whole drilling rig and with it the team of 20; all lost without trace.

On a personal side note, on my regular walks to and from Baku's centre I had always wondered about one particular street opposite the US embassy. There's a blow along it in any season, howling in winter, cooling in summer; inwardly I'd criticised the city authorities for creating such a wind tunnel - hadn't they studied the prevailing winds etc. before producing a layout? - then I checked the name of the street: go on, guess! Maybe it blows in tribute to that industrial hero. Anyway, there's always a moment's mental pause as I cross the street.



## Boom 1

Here too, for context, a brief reminder of the country's earlier industrial history. The first oil boom had begun towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the Russian Tsar had allowed private ownership of oil sources in the empire. This attracted the likes of the Nobels - yes, that's where the prize money originated - the Rothschilds and Rockefeller. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Baku was producing close to half the world's oil. Fast forward to World War II and Hitler is driving his forces, first eastward, then south towards Baku, desperate for that oil. There are

independence, President Heydar Aliyev persuaded 11 major companies from 8 different countries, in a careful political balance, to invest in and help develop the oil industry. Some 10 years later, as the dividends began to roll in, I noted the remarkable upsurge in social conditions and infrastructural advance that has continued since then. Oil Rocks got a new lease of life and, by our visit, was providing 4,000 families with employment and income, as well as contributing to the energy still required on a scale to support industry and modern life-style.



tales about Nazi forces that had got as far as the North Caucasus. The stories go that resistance and the ensuing slow progress literally drained their tanks, leading to the requisitioning of bikes and horses for the retreat. That they failed to achieve Hitler's aim, however, was certainly a factor in his eventual downfall.

Back on Oil Rocks, hearing their story, we had to acknowledge the memorial commemorating the achievements of Mikhail Kaverochkin and his team; their efforts helping Azerbaijan to rebuild after World War II.

## Boom 2

The modern oil boom began following the 1994 'Contract of the Century'. Three years after regaining

Naturally, the non-engineer in me and my colleagues wanted to see the liquid cause of the herculean labour that went into building such an immense structure in such a daunting location - the black gold. Back on a minibus, we were driven to what was clearly an outpost; safety rules presumably keeping us away from the productive oilface. But there on an abandoned-looking pier was a surviving valved pipe. Bucket produced, reluctant wheel turned and out trickled a liquid closer to old gold than black. The smell was the clincher, and we rode back to lunch the happier for witnessing with our own eyes and noses the result of all that labour, and sacrifice. The food was good; as it should be to sustain such work.



By way of convenience, economy and novelty, our return to solid ground was by the ship that ferried shift changes. As we sailed towards Baku port, the picturesque capital's eventide lighting was a further reminder; the fruit of oilmen's labours.

### **Reflections...**

This was 18 years ago and, of course I've heard that there have been many changes since then. I would like to go back and see what I'd submit is an industrial wonder of the world. I understand that it is a production

platform but, at some point, could it be an industrial museum. I imagine even oil-sceptical tourists being taken by the outrageous audacity of *Neft Dashlari* and taking away a souvenir phial of its energy. While Oil Rocks and its product may be coming towards the end of its useful life, superseded by sources more environmentally friendly, its labour, achievement and contribution to life and economy have been phenomenal, and there should surely be a tangible historical record.

It is not always easy to overcome instinctive resistance to concepts and cultures not exactly in line with our own, or not to judge past times according to modern precepts. Personal contact and observation is much the most satisfying way to true understanding. When one sees what Kaverochkin's work led to, and reads that he was awarded the Order of Lenin (twice) for that work, think of the time, think of the work; did he merit commendation? I submit it's hard not to answer yes.

### **...in art**

And politicians were not the only layer of society to feel the awe. Just a few weeks ago a visit to the Yarat Contemporary Art Space on Baku's Boulevard, rewarded this writer with an exhibition of works by Maral

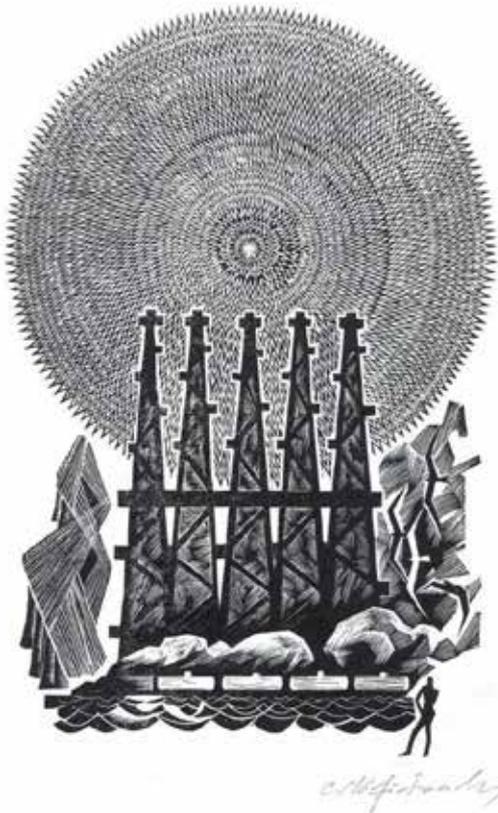








*S. Bahlulzada, Evening on the Caspian, 1961*



Rahmanzadeh (1916-2008), the first artist to work on Oil Rocks (1953) and record at first hand the drama, beauty and inspiration of the people and work there. She was followed a few years by Tahir Salahov, whose 'Severe Style' was a realistic contrast with the official iconography of 'Socialist Realism'. Their images of Oil Rocks are now firmly established in artistic Azerbaijani folklore.

**It's the context...**

As implied above, Azerbaijan is working to develop those environmentally friendlier sources of energy, even hosting COP29 last November. There was a moment there, however, that bemused a BBC apparently devoid of the contextual awareness necessary to understand a statement by Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev:

*The president of COP29's host country has told the UN climate conference that oil and gas are a «gift of god». Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev criticised «Western fake news» about the country's emissions and said nations «should not be blamed» for having fossil fuel reserves. (<https://is.gd/cmC9v7>)* ◆

*J. Mufidzada, Oil Rocks, 1965*

*T. Javadov, Coming back from a shift, 1958*



*T. Salahov, Caspian Oil today, 2008*