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# Register

## Obituaries

# Lady Renwick

Iranian-born socialite who interviewed Ayatollah Khomeini before making her home in Britain, where she was dubbed 'the caviar queen'

When the Iranian Revolution was imminent, Homayoun Mazandi, later known as Lady Renwick, flew to Paris to appeal directly to Ayatollah Khomeini. At the time she was the wife of Joe Mazandi, the founder and publisher of the Iran Tribune and the Iran bureau chief for United Press International. She had the pluck to pose as a journalist to gain an audience, one of the few women ever to be granted an interview.

Arriving determined and devoid of the necessary headscarf, she was told by Khomeini's staff to cover her hair. She refused — until the ayatollah himself insisted. For 40 minutes, she questioned him about women's rights and the future of her beloved Iran under Islamic law. When she left, Khomeini coolly observed: "This woman is a danger to every Iranian man between the ages of 18 and 80."

British society was more receptive to her charms. Known as Homi to her friends, she was well-mannered yet resolutely undeferential. She stepped on to the London scene bejewelled and exotic, the epitome of Persian femininity. As a generous hostess, invitations to parties at her home in Chester Square became much prized. Bankers, businessmen, painters and politicians were drawn to her social evenings, as were Princess Margaret and Princess Michael of Kent.

One night, a guest arrived with an unkempt gate crasher, and she told him that the scruff must leave. The scruff petitioned her: "Do you have teenage children? Have they heard of the Rolling Stones?" She responded in her thickly accented English: "Yes I have children, but I don't want any stoness rrrrolling through this house". She let Mick Jagger stay on the condition he

## She described a \$22m event featuring 30kg of caviar as a 'little party'

behaved himself. It was not unusual, however, to find Homayoun pirouetting on tables to the music of zither and tambourines. She could coax even the most reserved Englishmen into a limbo line; she loved to have her male friends each "fish" with a stick for a lady's shoe in a sack to find the "Cinderella" they would be seated next to at dinner. Rumours of tureens of Persian delicacies began to circulate and Nigel Dempster anointed her "the caviar queen" in his Daily Mail column.

She was born in Tehran in 1939, one of five children of Major Mahmoud Yazdanparast Pakzad and his wife Nusrat al-Muluk. As a teenager, she took an interest in politics and was offered a job on the news desk of a television station, where she met her future husband. In 1960, at the age of 22, Homayoun married Youssef (Joe) Mazandi and they had two children: a daughter, Yasmine (Yassi), and a son, Shariar.

The Mazandi home — designed by Frank Lloyd Wright — in the Elahieh district of Tehran featured 10ft-wide chandeliers, Persian carpets and sinu-



Lady Renwick with Khomeini, top, and with David Frost. Below: with family friends and Jackie Kennedy at a party

letter from the school that Yassi was "a sheep". When questioned, a curt headmistress clarified that Yassi was in fact "a wolf" who had commanded the march. Relieved and proud, she congratulated the headmistress on educating independent-thinking leaders. There were no expulsions.

The Foreign Office was less forgiving when she met Lyndon Johnson, the former US president, at a reception in Iran. A tall American approached her, and they began chatting; she explained that she had just placed her children in boarding school in England. He asked: "Why not America?" She replied that "England has history, culture and much better schools", then excused herself to meet an important person, only to be formally introduced to the same man moments later.

Committed to promoting a positive image of Iranian culture in her newly adopted Britain, she gathered educated and high-achieving London-based Iranians. She would address her audience with "Salaam ba-che ha", the equivalent of "Hi guys!" rather than the more formal "ladies and gentlemen". It was her charisma that united the notoriously individualistic Persian plutocrats to form in the early 1990s the Iran Heritage Foundation, of which she became one of the founding trustees.

In 1989 Homayoun married Harry Andrew Renwick, 2nd Baron Renwick. At their wedding reception in the Houses of Parliament, a globe of golden beluga caviar was served with fanfare on a large silver platter. Halfway through the evening the venue ran out of the accompanying toast and staff scrambled to find more bread. In a flash, she exclaimed: "Never mind, let's finish the caviar first before we worry about the toast!"

Besides her wealth and warm

welcome, it was her non-judgmental nature that attracted politicians. Some would infiltrate her parties before an important vote to influence a cabinet member, for much of the cabinet could be found at Chester Square.

Margaret Thatcher called her "Honeymoon" and used her as a shield to avoid answering difficult political questions at a function. Homayoun's son recalled the two sitting together and agreeing that they could solve the problems of the

world but did not know how to deal with their children.

Thatcher, and later her successor, John Major, called on "Honeymoon" to mediate with the Iranian government in an attempt to lift the fatwa on Salman Rushdie.

She became increasingly appreciated for her diplomacy and dedication to charitable causes and official appointments followed. Sir Hugh Fraser and Sir Eldon Griffiths, then minister for sport, had been enlisted by Eunice Shriver to form the British Special Olympics. They were on the lookout for funds for a national tournament and were told that Homayoun had "the means and the kind heart" to help. She became the London chairwoman of the committee for the Special Olympics.

In 1993 she established the Friends of Persian Art and Culture at Cambridge University and supported several books on Iran including *Safavid Persia*, a collection of papers by Professor Charles Melville that was dedicated to her.

In 2013 she became honorary ambassador for the philanthropic Nowruz

## Margaret Thatcher asked her to mediate with Iran over the Rushdie fatwa

Commission, bringing together dignitaries in London from cultures that celebrate the ancient spring festival of Nowruz. Fifteen ambassadors from the Stans in central Asia — an unlikely social collective — found themselves happily congregating for grand evenings of dinner, poetry and music, with Lady Renwick as discreet conductor.

She is survived by her children Shariar Mazandi, an artist and hotelier in Hastings, and Yassi Mazandi Castilla, a sculptor and artist in Los Angeles.

When Lord Renwick suffered ill health, Homayoun turned her attention to her husband, caring for him until his death in 2020.

Though she downsized homes in later years and the parties became more intimate and infrequent, she remained an indomitable spirit and renowned figurehead for Persia.

Her passion to make others happy built many bridges in her lifetime — "I love to see people enjoying themselves, it's good for them," she would say — and she never lost her cultural attachment to her country.

**Homayoun Mazandi, Lady Renwick, was born on July 11, 1939. She died of kidney failure on July 5, 2023, aged 83**



Pahlavi threw the extravagant Persepolis party in 1971 to celebrate 2,500 years of the Persian Empire, outrage over the cost — rumoured to have been \$22 million at the time — helped to lead to the revolution in 1979. Though the caviar was local (all 30kg of it) the rest of the food was flown from Paris and managed by Maxim's. As Joe was close to the Shah, and Homayoun was friends with Princess Fatima, the Shah's sister, the Shah sent a representative to ask them for their advice on the finer details. When the three-day event arrived, Joe was there but Homayoun was at her *pied à terre* in London. "I'm not going all that way for a little party," she said.

In 1972 she moved to London and divorced Joe in 1986. The children were sent to boarding schools, Heathfield and Harrow, but their mother remained an opinionated presence. When Yassi's expulsion loomed for being involved in a student protest, her mother was disappointed to read in a

ous interconnected ponds in the garden, softly illuminated by 200 candlelit boats. Their swimming pool had a tree in the centre because Joe could not bear to uproot it, and a charming Japanese bridge led to the island on which it grew. One British friend who stayed remembered returning from a restaurant in Tehran and tripping over a solid rolled carpet in the dark. The Shiraz and Isfahan silk carpets were priceless but at night remained in the safe custody of the staff, who slept in them.

When Shah Mohammad Reza