THE APPROACH: A PERSONAL BACKGROUND

For the average American business traveler, the approach into Baku, Azerbaijan, is likely to have an impact like few other places in the world. The Apsheron peninsula juts into the southern Caspian Sea like a pale fist, and upon descending, one sees immediately that the surface is littered with rusty derricks, slimy, oil-slicked ponds, collapsing factories, unnatural surface impoundments, leaking tank farms, leaking above-ground pipelines, and crumbling worker housing (Fig. 1). Is this what our future will involve as American petroleum industry professionals - geologists, engineers, and pipeline engineers alike - seek to assure oil supplies to our thirsty world? To me, what I see looks more like the past, bringing to mind what great expanses of Oklahoma and Texas might have looked like without oil and gas conservation, spacing requirements, and environmental regulations. It also makes one mindful of how close we always are to apocalypse, whether due to depleted stores of energy or a toxified earth. According to many reports, the world has 50 years of petroleum left, and then we're out. Here, in Baku, one realizes that much of what is left is here. Ironically, this is where oil production began, in 1847 with an oil well literally dug into the ground not many miles from what is now the Baku airport.

In Azerbaijan, ancient religious rites centered around natural gas seeps which, once ignited, burned from the ground like eternal flames. In the pre-Christian religion of the people of this region, Zoroastrianism, the eternal fires symbolized purification. Evil would be burned up by the forces of good. Ideas persist, and even now, each year on the first day of spring, ancient rites are repeated as Azerbaijani youth light fires built of kindling and old wood on the eve of Novruz Bairam, an Islamic festival marking the first day of Spring, which has not unconsciously incorporated the old pagan rites. According to the tradition, after the flames die down to a few feet in height,