



IX INTERNATIONAL ORAL HISTORY CONFERENCE

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An Introduction to the Iranian Left Oral History Project: New Experience in Oral History -Three Generations of the Iranian Leftist Movement (1920s - 1990s)

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Foreword

The following paper falls into two parts. First, I would like to speak a little of my earlier role in Iranian political life. This background has given me an intimate, first-hand knowledge of a range of problems and issues in the history of the Iranian leftist movements from their inception at the end of the last century to the present day. In particular, I would like to outline how the Iranian Left Oral History Project grew out of my involvement in Iranian politics. Second, I would like to give a brief synopsis of my systematic research, which, I believe, might be of general interest to those involved in the field of oral history.

I

My Political Background and the First Step to Oral History

The link between my own political life and oral history was forged during my years of "double exile" in the Tudeh Party of Iran (TPI), the oldest party of the Iranian left. I take up the story in the year 1983, which was a particularly difficult one in my life. The TPI, of which I was a member, was banned by the Islamic government and I was forced leave my homeland on account of political persecution. I was aware that I would face many difficulties and that I would need to prepare myself appropriately. I did not, however, know that these difficulties would arise, first and foremost, in the ranks of my own party.

After a short period of practical party activity in exile, I came across numerous unseemly and improper practices in the party leadership. I thus began to express criticism of its misguided policies.

In the end, as a result both of my critical attitude towards our party's policies after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and of my differences with the politburo of the TPI, I was "banished" as an "unstable person" to a town on the outskirts of Prague in October 1985, together with my wife and son; a form of "double exile", cut off from the rest of the party organisation. We were also deprived of the right to contact relatives and close friends by post or telephone.

Life in exile is hard, especially in "double exile". The situation is the harder when one sees how members of one's family also suffer on account of one's own critical attitude towards the Stalinist party leadership.

At this time, I was forty years old and already had a seventeen year long, dangerous political career behind me. During my time in "double exile" I came to the conclusion that

membership of a party which robs its members of the courage to think differently and to express their opinions is worthless.

In this way I freed myself from my one-sided ideas and, from that moment on, saw no need for political and party secretiveness. In 1986, therefore, I published my critical, political views in two pamphlets and resigned from the party.¹

The politburo of the TPI reacted very sharply to my resignation, publishing a pamphlet and several articles in "Nameh Mardom", the organ of the central committee of the party.²

In the period of exile in Czechoslovakia I received a monthly support payment for my family at the beginning of each month from the office of the Red Cross in Prague.

One day during my second "year of exile", while visiting the above mentioned office, I met a sixty-six year old Iranian, who had also come to receive his monthly support payment. I discovered that he shared the same fate as I had, and had been condemned to "double exile" six months before me. He had been living for about two years in a small apartment, only a few hundred metres from us. His name was Ghani.³

Ghani had been condemned to life imprisonment during the reign of the Shah, that is before the Revolution. He had been one of Iran's longest-serving political prisoners when, following the Revolution, he was released after twenty-five years captivity in February 1979. Four years later, he was forced to emigrate for political reasons. Although married for thirty-four years, he was able to spend only five years together with his wife and two daughters.

Ghani came to live with us. During this time, he allowed me to share intensively in his political recollections, particularly of his twenty-five years' imprisonment in the seven prisons of the Shah's regime. Here he met countless numbers of Iran's political prisoners, including socialists, communists, guerilla fighters, nationalists and religious, sometimes sharing a cell with them. He was therefore able to describe very accurately both their characters and situations and events concerning them.

Several of them held high state office after the Revolution. Some of them became deputies of Khomeini, prime ministers, parliamentary presidents, ministers, governors, and even prison chiefs and torturers of the new regime, many of them leading members of, or activists in the parties and political organisations.

Ghani's recollections are for me among the most interesting of all recollections of political prisoners in contemporary Iranian history.

¹ My views have evoked a broad echo and have been published in several opposition journals. As an example, I mention the foreword to the third edition of the political memorandum of Iradj Eskandari (former general secretary of the TPI): "Through his publication of a pamphlet and his appeal "To the cadres and members of the TPI", Captain Hamid Ahmadi (Anwar) had revealed the inner decay of the TPI and exerted a deep influence on the movement. His effective work of clarification has been of great importance for the movement. He resigned from the party as a central committee member in Dey 1366, Iranian chronology (January 1987).

² To illustrate the TPI leadership's hostility to my views, some of party's publications against me may be mentioned:

1 An article in Nameh Mardom, 16.4.1988

1 Reply of the politburo of the central committee of the TPI to Anwar(Hamid Ahmadi)'s pamphlet; 22 page internal party pamphlet, June 1988

1 Declaration of the politburo of the TPI on Anwar's appeal, Nameh Mardom, No. 208, 24.5.1988

1 Appeal of the general secretary of the TPI to the party cadres and members on the party radio

1 An article in Nameh Mardom, No. 218, 23.7.1987

1 Communique of the secretariat of the central committee of the TPI, Nameh Mardom, No. 238, 20.12.1987

1 Communique of the central committee of the TPI, Nameh Mardom, No. 211, 14.6.1987

³ After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc in 1990, Ghani resigned from the TPI. He left Prague when, as a result of the turbulence in Czechoslovakia, the borders were opened.

While he was staying with our family Ghani became so ill that he had to be treated in hospital. The doctors gave us little hope that he would survive. We visited him regularly.

After receiving the hopeless prognoses from the doctors, I remarked to my wife that it was regrettable not to have written down and preserved for future generations a single one of Ghani's recollections. I asked myself how this phenomenon should be interpreted on the political stage of our society and whether it might not be a symptom of weakness in our political culture.

Contrary to all expectations, Ghani survived his illness and returned to us some months later.

I told him about my thoughts and about the conversations on the subject with my wife. He agreed with me and explained that the problem lay in the fact that he could speak about his recollections easily enough, but not write them down. He had attempted to do so several times, but had given up on each occasion. As he was telling me this, my eyes lighted upon the tape recorder, which stood near the TV in our sitting room. In a flash of inspiration, I asked him whether he had ever thought of recording his memoirs on tape. The idea was new to him, but he liked it. Ghani agreed that I should interview him, and we began with the work. At the time idea was born, I was unfamiliar with the theory and methodology of oral history.

I first divided Ghani's life into different periods, beginning with his youth, going to the beginning of his political life, to the long period of his imprisonment, up to the years in exile.

We agreed that I would ask precise questions while he was speaking, so that the logical connection of the themes would not be lost.

The recording and the written processing of his recollections took about one and a half months. After the completion of our joint efforts, Ghani received a copy of the work and the cassettes, while a further copy of the written record remained in my possession. At his request, we agreed that the work should be published after his death.

Eight years after this event, as I was developing my plan for the "Iranian Left Oral History", I included Ghani on the list of the narrators I had chosen. As a result of my studies and the experience acquired, I had planned on this occasion to record his experiences on video tape. On visiting him, however, I realised that, in the meantime, Ghani had lost the will to live and thus no longer had the energy to participate in this project.

I deeply regret this, as it was the story of his life which was my first step to Iranian Left Oral History.

II

Systematic Research in the History of the Leftist Movement in Iran

After resigning from the TPI eight years ago, I devoted myself to research in the field of the Iranian left movement and published two books and several articles on the subject.

Towards the end of the Gorbachev era, I had free access to some historical documents on the Iranian left movement in the state archives in Moscow and Baku. It was a considerable effort to obtain documents which, for decades, had not been available. I published some of them together with an accompanying study under the title "Documents and Historical Studies Socialist and Communist Organisations in Iran".

Thanks to my contacts with the former activists of several Iranian leftist parties and organisations, I was able in addition to collect hundreds of historical documents and about ninety internal party letters and writings for the period 1917- 1990. I presented this unique

collection on the left movement in Iran to the archive of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam (IISH)⁴

Since the written documents of the left movement in Iran revealed only a part of the history and the public political life of the left, the collection of oral documents of this history was no less important for me. In this way, it was possible, on the one hand, to refine some aspects and, on the other hand, to uncover some unspoken or manipulated problems. This made the narrators - some of whom were themselves leaders or activists of leftist organisations - very valuable sources for this study.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc, there were more potential narrators than ever before. Thus I came upon the idea of using this unique opportunity for further systematic and thorough investigation in connection with my theme. To this end, I had to find, select and interview three generations of suitable persons who had been active in four of the five periods of the leftist movement.

In 1993, I informed my friend Ervand Abrahamian, Professor of History at Baruch College at the City University of New York, about my plans and received support and encouragement. In April 1994, I presented my project to the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. A few months later, the institute informed me of its decision to support the project. As project director and copyright owner of the "Iranian Left Oral History", I began to conduct the interviews with 28 selected narrators.

It will, I believe, be useful to report on some of the experience gained in researching this field, experience which might be of general interest. However, it will only be after the completion of the second collection of Iranian Left Oral History, that final, valid conclusions can be drawn.

The goal and the methodology of the project

The method used in the project is based on narrative Oral history, which has two principal goals. The first concerns political historical aspects, the second social historical aspects.

Political Historical Aspects

In respect of this goal, I concentrate on recording political facts and the experience of those narrators who played a role either in decision making or in the political and organisational life of fifteen parties, organisations, and leftist movements in Iran.⁵

Research results make it possible to refine the interpretation of published documents and writings on the political attitudes of parties and organisations and to gain new insights about various aspects of their history.

Social Historical Aspects

The goal here was to record the personal and social experience of the narrators. The result was a collection of data, which could be both interesting and useful for those engaged in research into the leftist movement and the sociological aspects of contemporary Iranian history.

Here I considered cultural particularities and the role of the leftist movement in the superstructure of society during the past 70 years. For this reasons I focused not so much on the political functions of my narrators, but rather attempted by means of appropriately formulated questions to uncover and record political, social, cultural and intellectual themes in contemporary Iranian history.

⁴ Cf. The collection of documents from Hamid Ahmadi, "Documents of the Iranian Socialist and Communists Parties, Organisations and Groups (1917-1990)", *International Review of Social History*, Vol 40, Part 2, August 1995, pp 345 and 349-50, Cambridge University Press.

⁵ On the present situation of the Iranian leftist parties and organisations cf. Hamid Ahmadi, 'Die iranische Linke zwischen Dogma und Revision', in *Inamo, Berichte und Analysen zu Politik und Gesellschaft des Nahen und Mittleren Ostens*, No. 4, Winter 1995.

Some statistical data on the " collection of the Iranian Left Oral History Project"

- 1 The political activities of these narrators cover four of the five periods of the Iranian leftist movement.
- 1 The narrators belong to three different generations. Their ages range from 37 to 92 years
- 1 The narrators belonged to 20 different parties, organisations and leftist groups from the 1920s to 1995.
- 1 63% of the narrators were founders of several of these parties, organisations and groups, or were or still are members of their respective politburos, central committees or leadership structures.
- 1 42% of the narrators were political prisoners either under the Pahlavi dynasty (Reza and Mohammed Reza Shah) or the Islamic government in the period 1937 to 1988 (a total of 72 years imprisonment).
- 1 All narrators were in political exile in the period 1947 to 1995 (a total of 510 years of exile).
- 1 The narrators have spent an average of 22 years of their lives either in prison, in exile, or both.
- 1 57% of the narrators have a degree from universities in Iran and Europe and include a professor, eight doctors in medicine or the humanities, four engineers and one lawyer.
- 1 Each recorded interview last on average nine and a half hours; in once case three and a half hours, with the rest between six and twenty-two hours.
- 1 Each interview was divided into three phases and took between 4 and 29 sessions. The recording of the recollections of Bozorg Alawi, author and professor of Persian literature, took longest. Lasting 11 months, it is recorded on 22 video cassettes.
- 1 95% of the narrators have been living in exile.

Historical Periods and the Political Activity of the Narrators

Founded in the year 1891 in the cities of Tehran, Tabriz, Rasht, Maraghe and Ardebil, the first small, underground Marxist group has a history of a little more than a hundred years.⁶ In the 1890s another small leftist group came into existence in Rasht, in the north of Iran. Its most prominent member was Dr. Alexander Atabakian. He had contacts with Peter Kropotkin and Max Nettlau.⁷ A number of these leftist activists and some Iranian socialists played a role in the Iranian constitutional revolution from 1906 to 1911. Of this generation, only three or four memoirs exist.

The second generation of Iranian leftists (socialist and communist) played a role in the October Revolution and were active in Iran in the years 1920 to 1941. My project for the Iranian Left Oral History begins with this generation and continues with the two subsequent generations of activists. The project covers the following historical periods in the history of the leftist movement:

- The second historical period, from the 1920s to 1941. The narrators belonged to the second generation of the Iranian left. The average age of those interviewed is 87. This group provided 7% of the narrators in the first, completed, collection.

- The third historical period, from 1941 to 1955. The narrators belong to the third generation of Iranian leftists. The average age of those interviewed is 70. This group makes up 30% of the narrators of the first, above mentioned collection.

- The fourth and fifth historical periods: from the 1960s to the Iranian Revolution of 1979; and from the Revolution to the present day. The narrators belong to the fourth generation⁸ of Iranian leftists. Their average age is 50. This groups makes up 60% of the narrators in the first collection.

Research Experience

Compiling the List of Narrators

The compilation of the master list, which included 133 narrators took about six months. It was possible to reduce this number to about 80, when it became clear that the accounts of several narrators were broadly similar. At the same time, the information obtained made it possible to identify new potential narrators not included in the original list. One of the difficulties in compiling the list of narrators arises from the political situation in Iran. About 85% of those involved in the Iranian left in this century have been active underground or in hiding. On average, the narrators interviewed for the first collection have spent seven years underground. Some of the leading members and cadres of the leftist organisations are still living under pseudonyms.

Establishing Contact

On average, 90% of the narrators on the list for the first collection agreed to be interviewed. There were, however, variations, depending on how contact was established. When direct contact could be made - this was the case with 80% of the narrators - 96% gave positive answers. It was obviously important to be able to meet them personally, and to explain the importance of oral history and oral historiography in this field. Of the remaining 20%, who

⁶ The founders of the first Marxist cells in Iran were members of a group of Armanian intellectuals. They decided to take this step on January 5th, 1891 in Tabriz, from where they organised their activities. They introduced some active members of the social democratic groups in Tabriz (1906-1911) to Marxist principles. (I owe this information to my friend Zare Makarian of the archive of the Mechitaristen Monastery in Vienna).

⁷ See Atie van der Horst and Elly Koen (eds.), *Guide to the International Archives and Collections at the IISH, Amsterdam*. (The present writer has obtained photocopies of correspondence between Max Nettlau and Atabakian in the IISH Archive in 1993)

were contacted by telephone, letters, or messages delivered by third parties, only 60% gave me a positive answer.

The advantage of being known

After establishing contact with, and interviewing the narrators, it emerged that 85% already knew me directly or indirectly. Most of them were aware of my background and political activity in the Iranian left movement. Most of them had also read my books, pamphlets or articles on the Iranian left in recent years.

Interview Venue

50% of the interviews were conducted in the narrators' homes, the remainder at a venue arranged by me. It became clear that there were several advantages in conducting the interview in the home of a narrator. First, in the course of the interview, the narrator often remembered some photographic or written documents, which he was then able to produce on the spot. Second, the home environment is psychologically favourable, as the narrators had the added incentive of providing a record which would be of interest to their family, especially for their children.

Interview procedure

The interviews were conducted in two phases, unstructured and structured. The first phase, which often took two sessions, lasted between 3 and 10 hours. In these sessions, the narrators presented their own biography freely. Some of them wished to learn more about my political past and also about oral history, which was a new phenomenon for most of them. Most of them saw oral history mainly as a means of recording their political memoirs. I was able to make clear that the object of oral history was also to obtain information and material for the field of sociology, socio-psychology and social history. On the basis of the notes taken during this phase, I was able to prepare the questions for the second, structured phase. In some cases, standard questions were possible, but in most cases the questions had to be specifically formulated.

In some cases it was possible to begin the second phase of the interview immediately. In other cases, a further preparatory interview was necessary. Before beginning the video tape interview, I requested that the narrators produce any new historical documents from their personal archives, so that these could be recorded on video.

In the first video session, some of the narrators were uneasy or anxious. For all of them it was the first occasion on which they had recorded their recollections. I discovered that one way to alleviate such anxieties was to show the narrators a video recording of an earlier interview with another narrator. It is necessary to point out that most of the Iranian leftists have very unhappy memories of video recording. In the 1980s, one of the means by which the Islamic Republic of Iran proceeded against political opposition and political prisoners, especially on the left, was to extract a "video confession". It is likely that memories of such experience created psychological problems, which, however, were resolved after our first session.

Formal Agreement

Before the recording began, a formal agreement was signed between me and the narrator. All of narrators interviewed agreed to give me the copyright on the recorded material. They permitted me to publish their memoirs in any form, whether as a book or by making them available to archives, etc.

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