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The Notebook, the Closet, and the Film: Iranians Processing Trauma Through Public History, Case Study: The 1988 Executions

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Abstract: Iranians who lost loved ones during the revolutionary period (1979–89) have struggled with trauma for more than 40 years. The pain of loss and the knowledge of the torture that happened in the prisons have haunted Iranians who have unintentionally tried to process their trauma through public history. In this article I explore some of these cases by drawing upon interviews I conducted with family members, using them to provide a theoretical framework that demonstrates how generational experience contributed to the ways families, largely unaware of this historical field, utilize public history for healing purposes. Oppression has forced Iranians to engage with audiences as limited as one's family or as broad as on a global scale. As some Iranians have moved into diaspora, and with the transition of developed trauma into an inherited form, the fear of oppression has decreased generationally, increasing the levels of engagement with the public. This has encouraged Iranians living inside the country to join in such efforts on a larger scale. Whether public, semi-public, or less-than-public, all cases demonstrate how the process of healing has evolved into a form of resistance that strives for engagement while defying the forces that seek to silence them.

Keywords: trauma; healing; resistance; the Iranian Revolution; 1988 executions

1 Untold Stories and Efforts to Uncover Them

In recent years, Iranians have started to recall their country's national and political history before the 1979 Revolution and during the Pahlavi era, with a monumental history

approach.¹ This trend, which Friedrich Nietzsche first conceptualized, has been widely used through social media and signifies a major shift toward public history as a tool for recording and, more importantly, glorifying past eras.² What I study in this article, however, is a distinct trend of public history formed in the years after the 1979 Revolution, which focuses on commemorating the victims of the Revolution, providing opportunity for their families to mourn their loss while resisting the regime's endeavors to oppress and silence them. Mourning rituals are significant places of resistance against oppressive powers in Iranian culture and history. The ancient ritual of *Suvashun*, the mourning of Siavash, one of the young heroes of *Shahnameh*, killed by the order of the king of Turan, Afrasiab, the mourning of Hossein, the prophet Mohammed's grandson, martyred in Karbala, and even the mourning ceremonies of those killed in the uprising against the Shah before the Revolution, which turned into consecutive pivotal uprisings themselves, leading to the fall of the Shah, show that these rituals carry heavy political meaning and consequences. The Islamic Republic's pressure against holding such ceremonies has led to a shift to implement public history for the same purposes. However, faced with the oppressive methods of the regime, mourners became innovative in practicing public history, forcing them to engage with either very limited audiences or, if possible, a broader public. Three different categories can be identified: First, less-than-public, limited to a few family members within the safety of the familial bonds. Second, semi-public, including family, friends, and acquaintances they may encounter, as well as the media not controlled by the regime, which has a smaller audience, and last, fully public history that is mostly practiced outside of Iran.

The Revolution of 1979, in which the U.S.-backed Shah of Iran was toppled and eventually replaced with an Islamic theocracy, had far-reaching consequences for the diverse

1 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1980).

2 Scott Jenkins, "Nietzsche's Use of Monumental History," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 45, no. 2 (July 1, 2014): 169–81, quote on 172, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jnietstud.45.2.0169>.

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group of revolutionaries who fought to realize it.³ After the 1953 coup d'état, in which Western powers, especially the United States, helped depose the beloved Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh – who had nationalized Iranian oil and ended English colonial claims to it – leftist anti-imperialist emotions and activism in Iran heightened, leading to the 1979 Revolution. However, the movement was gradually hijacked by religious authority, and all the other factions of the Revolution, most importantly the young activists, fell victim to the newly formed theocracy. Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) or People's Holy Warriors, a Muslim Marxist revolutionary group founded in 1965, was one of the most prominent revolutionary factions, which later turned opposition, and its members constituted the majority of victims in the post-Revolution massacres. However, drastic changes in the organization's political identity in the years leading up to and after the Revolution, including the elimination of some of its leaders in 1975 by the organization, set it far from its founding agenda. Majid Sharif-Vaghefi was one of its prominent leaders, who was murdered by the organization. His body was burned and buried somewhere outside of Tehran, only discovered when his murderer was arrested by *Savak*, the secret police of the Imperial State of Iran, shortly before the Revolution. MEK also extensively recruited children and used them to carry out their suicide bombings.⁴ The majority of the victims of the massacre of the summer of 1988 were also children or young adults who had little direct communication with or understanding of the organization's core. These issues, alongside MEK's failed incursion from Iraq (where they were based at the time) into Iran in July 1988, when the country was still at war with Iraq, turned public opinion against the organization and contributed to the public amnesia surrounding the events. At the same time, the theocratic regime's actions changed the public perception of Islam, turning it from a righteous creed on the side of the oppressed into an oppressive authority.

While the trauma of these massacres could not have been expressed and recorded by traditional forms of historiography, those most affected by it started to utilize public history methods to process their pain and seek engagement from others. Public history is generally not

taught at academic institutions in Iran since it does not bode well with the regime's agenda in controlling the historical narrative. In this regard, most of the examples of the utilization of public history to express and process grief were carried out by people who have no knowledge of such a historical practice and are not familiar with its principles. Rather, it is the engagement-seeking aspect of public history that appeals to them, in order to make their pain known to others and seek justice for their loved ones as much as possible. Some examples discussed here are excellent cases of public history in the sense that they essentially engage with the general public. Others, however, constitute different degrees of public history practice, in less-than-public and semi-public ways, which directly result from the oppression felt by those who conducted them.

This story is a very personal one for me, and in a way, writing it is how I use public history to process an old trauma. There are numerous memories of forfeited lives in my family, who were possibly tortured and later killed by a firing squad or a noose. Studying Iranian history in Tehran, I could not write about any of them, and their memories remained buried under a thick layer of caution and fear. The pictures of these young people smiling or dancing in old sepia photographs have always brought back a sense of dread for those who knew them, and by proxy to us, the second generation after the Revolution, who lived under the shadow of the unfortunate and unspeakable things that happened to our parents' loved ones and could still happen to those who would stand up to the regime's oppressive tactics. Born to a generation of alarmed Iranians who foreswore any political activities, I got used to keeping quiet about the atrocities that occurred after the 1979 Revolution, whether privately or as a historian. Moving out of Iran, however, gave me the opportunity to revisit these stories, which in a way signifies the discrepancy in the degrees of engagement with public history methods for communities inside and outside of Iran to evoke such a painful past. I used oral history to collect stories overshadowing the lives of three generations of my family and friends and put them together with other individual or – limited – collective efforts to remember the victims of the executions happening after the Revolution in Iran. By doing so, I contribute to the transnational literature on public history and shared authority, which has thus far neglected to explore how Iranians have commemorated the 1988 executions. Since the topic is extremely sensitive for the families inside and to some extent outside of Iran, I will use pseudonyms to introduce the people whom I talked to, regardless of their current residence, which I have also chosen not to disclose. While my focus will be on the first decade after 1979, I will also add

³ For more on this, see Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, provide places of publication whenever you list a book 2018); Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic Second Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

⁴ Vali Nasr, *Iran's Grand Strategy: A Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025), 68.

examples of mourning and remembering the victims of more recent executions through public history methods.

Revolutionary-period youths and their parents with close ties to the victims have, in a way, developed a unique sort of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). There is evidence to suggest that family members of people exposed to traumatic events can also develop PTSD.⁵ Few authors have discussed their processing of trauma through the means of public history. A brilliant and heartbreaking example is Nasser Mohajer's *Voices of a Massacre: Untold Stories of Life and Death in Iran, 1988*, in which he compiled the oral histories of the family members seeking to know about the fate of their loved ones, some of whom tirelessly try to find their remains.⁶ *Languages of Trauma: History, Memory, and Media* presents extensive research on how art and media can convey and alleviate the trauma of those affected during some of the most traumatic events in contemporary global history. Alas, it does not say much about their family members and how they express inherited trauma.⁷ The signs of the family's trauma have been around me for a long time before I could see the footprint of public history, shared authority, and engagement-seeking tendencies of those who exhibited their pain.

First, I discuss some examples of such public history practices from my family and their friends who lost loved ones to the revolutionary period massacres. Since I did not know the young victims personally, I conducted oral histories with their family members to record their stories and provide the context for their public history practices. One of those young people was Manouchehr, and I talked to Zari, a woman from his extended family. According to Zari he was said to be the handsome brother among his siblings, though Iranians are inclined to exaggerate the beauty of the lost youth, which starts metaphorically but turns quite literal with time. Manouchehr was a meticulous officer and a professional boxer who used to practice with his younger brother, resulting in a close relationship between the pair. He also participated in the Munich Olympics of 1972, and a couple of his trophies won in different championships are still kept and displayed by his family (Figure 1) He served in Abadan's *Shahr bani* (Police) when the Rex Cinema Fire

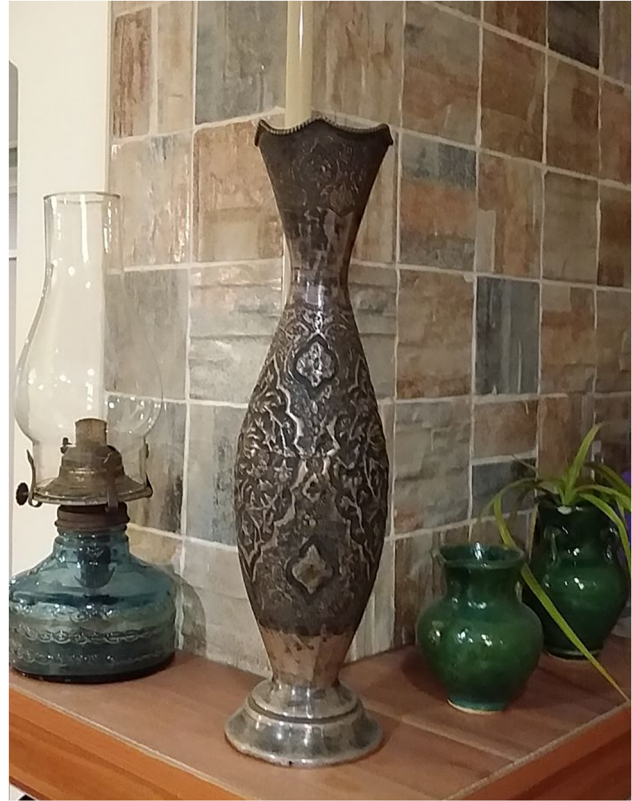


Figure 1: Manouchehr's cup, honoring him as the exemplary champion sent to the Romanian competitions. Credit: Zari.

happened on August 19, 1978, on the anniversary of the 1953 coup. The Rex Cinema Fire was a turning point in the Revolution, which revealed the extent of people's dissatisfaction with the Shah's regime.⁸

Manouchehr was not on duty that day and only came back to town right when the catastrophe that killed around 400 people was happening. He was ordered to stop people from approaching the flames to prevent further casualties. When, after the Revolution, he was summoned by the revolutionary tribunal, his parents, particularly his father, asked him not to go, but Manouchehr, who was sure of his innocence, decided to report to Evin Prison. Nevertheless, the presiding members of the revolutionary tribunal, one of whom was a clergy member who had been arrested by Manouchehr just before the Revolution – and later mentioned this during the trials – condemned the twenty-nine-year-old to death in 1980. He was shot on September 4 in Abadan. The news of his execution reached his family in a brutal and insensitive way through the 2 pm radio news, bringing shock, grief, and unmitigated rage to all. A young

5 National Institute of Mental Health, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd>.

6 Nasser Mohajer and Angela Y. Davis, eds., *Voices of a Massacre: Untold Stories of Life and Death in Iran, 1988*, Oneworld Books (London: Oneworld Books, 2020).

7 Peter Leese, Julia Köhne, and Jason Crouthamel, eds., *Languages of Trauma: History, Memory, and Media* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2021).

8 Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 159.



Figure 2: Manouchehr's sword, part of his ceremonial attire. Credit: Zari.

man who was a relative and a friend of Manouchehr smashed the bones in his hand, punching the wall when he heard the news.⁹ Manouchehr's family received his body and was able to hold proper burial and mourning ceremonies, unlike the treatment received by those unfortunates who underwent the same experience eight years later. The Rex Cinema Fire was revealed to have been committed by a small group of individual extremist revolutionaries. Still, no efforts have been made to officially exonerate Manouchehr, and his body remains in section 41 of Tehran's cemetery, also known as the "Executed" section, where some of the victims of the summer of 1988 are also buried. The graves in section 41 are sporadically vandalized, which refreshes the trauma and pain for the families.

Out of Manouchehr's belongings, two have always been on display at his relatives' homes, where every visitor can see them: his sword, which was part of his ceremonial attire for the parades, and his will, more of a farewell letter written with a shaky hand on government stationery and put in an old-fashioned yellow iron frame (Figure 2). In exhibiting the items, his family subconsciously chose to use a semi-public history method to alleviate their pain, while seeking engagement by discussing the significance of the items with people who saw or asked about them. Manouchehr's father made up a collection of his trinkets, shirt buttons, and the like, keeping them in a closet and occasionally bringing them out, kissing them and crying, mourning his youngest son. In doing so, he sought solace in remembering Manouchehr

through a less-than-public history method. By gathering a collection, the family could form a shared authority while recording his history and let others remember and honor him within the sanctuary of their home.

Another example is a boy from an old family neighborhood named Jamshid, a lively young man who never failed to make everyone around him laugh. He later became a member of the MEK revolutionary organization, whose members made up around eighty percent of the 4,000 to 10,000 that were executed during the summer of 1988.¹⁰ Most of them, including Jamshid, were not core members and did not have a role in armed confrontations before or after the Revolution. I talked to one of his close family members, Afsaneh, who told me about Jamshid's life before and after his arrest. Jamshid was not only a high-spirited young man who enjoyed dancing and socializing with his siblings and friends but also an avid reader with an impressive library for a young person, as others have attested. Most of his books were thrown out or burned after his arrest. To this day, she remembers an image of Jamshid sitting on the stairs outside, reading a book while bandaging his head with a *Chafiyeh* (Keffiyeh) to reduce the headache he usually got when chasing the words on paper for too long. She also remembers how he gave most of his salary to help the children and families living in *Gowd*, an impoverished neighborhood in the southern parts of Tehran, where revolutionary students helped those whom the Shah's political schemes had left destitute. In particular, the land reform program under the White Revolution, launched in 1963, uprooted the traditional feudal agricultural system without establishing new infrastructure, while also turning some of the previous landowners into industrial capitalist entrepreneurs.¹¹ Farmworkers who became small landowners after the reforms, lacked proper access to essential resources to farm their land and were forced to sell and move to the poor suburbs of Tehran. If they did not find work in the factories, they were without an income and had to live in the horrible conditions of the *Gowd*.

Afsaneh calls Jamshid a "freedom seeker," refusing the term Marxist, but his conversations with her show that, even if he did not see himself as a Marxist, his ideological orientation was close to Marxism. In one particular encounter, when Afsaneh expressed her doubts about the outcome of another transition of power, he answered:

As long as there are people, there is humanity and struggle. We cannot stand and watch the oppression ... Do you think good people always take the reins? The fight will never be over. We will

⁹ Zari, interview with Rahil Asgari, July 22, 2024.

¹⁰ Mohajer and Davis, *Voices of a Massacre*.

¹¹ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 2008, 133.

fight again with the new regime. If the Mojahedin came to power and they were bad, we would fight them. But we cannot abandon the fight just because the outcome might not be good, then they can do whatever they want... I do this for the hungry people, for those oppressed. I am not trying to please anybody but my own conscience.¹²

The exchange shows that his views were influenced by the concept of “permanent revolution” in Trotskyism as well as the moral teachings of Islam in defending the defenseless, while he was quite secular in his day-to-day practices and conduct.¹³ Furthermore, despite the Shah’s regime’s attempts to censor Marxist publications, the interest in reading such materials skyrocketed among the young revolutionary activists. For example, in 1972, more than 60 publishers (almost all publishers in the country) and their bookstores were raided, and all the banned books, which were mainly Marxist, were seized.¹⁴ To make these books more accessible to the general public, particularly their primary audience of young students and activists, they were printed using more affordable materials. This could indicate that the majority of Jamshid’s library consisted of Marxist books, which were topics of hot debate around the time of the Revolution. But since both terms, Marxism and Islam, were harshly smeared before and – especially – after the Revolution, many have refrained from associating their lost loved ones with such concepts.

As Afsaneh recounts, Jamshid had expressed the need for a multi-party political system in Iran during a meeting of the Islamic Association of Students. He was arrested the next day under suspicion of being a member of MEK. His family was not certain about his arrest until three weeks later, when, through family relations working with the new regime, they found out that Jamshid was being kept in Evin Prison. His father managed to secure a brief visit in a container at Evin, during which he barely recognized his firstborn son. Jamshid’s normally light complexion was darkened and drawn. He had been badly beaten and tortured to the point that his voice was the only feature still recognizable. Jamshid was sentenced to four years in prison and had already spent three of them when the Mojahedin started their incursion into Iran in July 1988, and Ruhollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader at the time, issued his *hokm*

(edict), which led to the subsequent massacre in the prisons.¹⁵

Jamshid was one of the many who were interrogated using physical and psychological torture during that summer.¹⁶ He was hanged at the age of 28 on August 1, 1988, at 8 am, at the infamous Evin Prison located in the northernmost part of Tehran at the foothills of Damavand, a place too beautiful to have such a dark history and house an even darker prison complex. His body was buried in Tehran’s cemetery without his family’s knowledge, although they were able to hold a mourning ceremony. Jamshid’s personal belongings were claimed by his immediate family members, who last saw him during the regular visitation hours at the prison, not knowing that they would never see him again. While they were not aware of the looming danger, Jamshid probably was, as the memory of his bloodshot eyes revealed to Afsaneh later. His father, though, had died of a stroke about a month before Jamshid, when he and several other parents were trying to see their children by the gates of Evin, and the guard taunted them with the possibility of killing their children. Jamshid’s pictures still adorn the tables set on different celebratory occasions. These table settings called *sofreh* (tablecloth), include special items related to each celebratory occasion such as the *Haft-Sin* table for *Nowruz* (new year celebration on spring equinox), or a *sofreh* adorned with pomegranates, watermelon, nuts, *Hafiz* book of poems for *Yalda* (winter solstice) to honor the creator and nature, and to ask for blessings as the seasons change while remembering those who are no longer with us, and keeping their memories alive.

The tattoo of Jamshid’s face on the arm of one of Afsaneh’s sons is the most obvious way the family publicly tells the story of his life and death, which can be construed as an unconventional method of public history (Figure 3). Using one’s body as a medium to record and display a piece of history for the public has become increasingly common in recent years. The father of Mohammad Mehdi Karami, one of the convicted protesters who was arrested after the uprisings of 2019 in response to a sudden rise in the price of oil and was executed on January 7, 2023, at the age of 21, had his son’s last words on his forearm tattooed, in which he told his dad about his sentence and asked him to hide it from his mother for as long as possible.¹⁷ After all, the body has the

12 Afsaneh, interview with Rahil Asgari, July 21, 2024.

13 Leon Trotsky, “Three Conceptions of the Russian Revolution,” Summer 1939, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/xx/3concepts.htm>; Qur’an 4:75, <https://quran.com/an-nisa/75>.

14 Rasoul Mohsenzadeh and Mohammad Mostafavi Rad, “Dynamic History of Iranian Book Publishing in Political and Social Settings,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (June 27, 2019): 500–16, 508, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12109-019-09666-4>.

15 Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 285.

16 Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

17 عکس روز: خالکوبی روی دست پدر محمد مهدی کریمی: ‘حکم من اعدامه، به مامان چیزی نگو’ [Photo of the Day: Tattoo on the Hand of Mohammad Mehdi Karami’s



Figure 3: Tattoo of Jamshid's face on the arm of Afsaneh's son. Credit: Afsaneh.

advantage of not being censorable while also having the capacity to be displayed publicly. Moreover, to this day, Afsaneh makes Jamshid's favorite food, *kotlet*, while cooking for family, friends, and guests, and explains its significance. It is known that offering and sharing food is one of the best methods to communicate with the public, and using this chance to remember Jamshid is also a brilliant way of engaging with public history to a degree. Though getting a tattoo represents a much more public way to remember the victims, in comparison to offering food and stories to family acquaintances, both can constitute methods of semi-public history to commemorate the lives of lost loved ones while also defying oppressive powers. The point of the semi-public history practice in these cases is the underlying hope that word-of-mouth will eventually alter public memory to include the suppressed stories of the victims. The fact that both Manouchehr's and Jamshid's families as well as other families discussed here, used public history without any professional knowledge of the practice reveals the levels of creativity that non-academic actors can implement under strenuous circumstances and as a form of resistance.

The MEK later committed acts that ruined its reputation – including the incursion – and turned public opinion against its members. That is one of the reasons that the nameless mass graves have occupied a silenced space in Iran's public memory. Families tried to retrieve the bodies of their loved ones and to have a proper burial for them. In most cases, not only did this not happen, but they were

forbidden to hold a ritual for the deceased, which contributed to their trauma and exacerbated the pain of their loss. *Khavaran*, located in the southeast of Tehran, is the last resting place for some of those executed in the city during the summer of 1988, alongside Bahá'í community leaders killed in the same period. But their families are often forbidden from visiting the mass graves, particularly during periods of political turmoil, and the site is constantly being destroyed, making the burial places less recognizable.¹⁸ On August 19, 2025, the deputy mayor of Tehran announced that section 41 of Tehran's cemetery, the burial place of some of the other victims of the 1988 executions, where Manouchehr was also buried, would be turned into a parking lot.¹⁹ Satellite images taken a day later confirm that the process has already begun.²⁰ Two days later, Amnesty International condemned the Islamic Republic's actions to erase the “forensic evidence” of the 1980s mass executions, declaring that “By destroying them, authorities are concealing evidence of their crimes and hampering the rights to truth, justice & reparations.”²¹

The last prisoners who need to be mentioned here are the group of young women who were executed alongside their comrades. Some of the women who had joined revolutionary organizations during the previous regime married the male members of the same organization in order to have the freedom to participate in all meetings and operations. Still, a number of them remained unmarried, which, according to Iran's cultural and religious principles, is synonymous with remaining a virgin. At the time of the executions, rumors circulated that these women were forcibly married to their jailors since “Islamic laws” do not allow the execution of a virgin. While many legal and religious scholars have refuted the existence of such laws, and I have no knowledge of the official reason – if any – cited for the forced marriages in the official documents, it is essential to explain how the issue was relayed to the families of these women. This sort of

18 “Iran: Walls Erected around Graves of Massacre Victims Show Urgent Need for International Investigation,” Amnesty International, September 13, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/iran-walls-erected-around-graves-of-massacre-victims-show-urgent-need-for-international-investigation/>.

19 “قبور اعدامشدگان دهه ۶۰ در بهشت‌زها پارکینگ می‌شود [Graves of Those Executed During the 1980s, in Behesht-i Zahra Will Be Turned Into ‘Parking Lots’],” *dw.com*, August 21, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/>.

20 “تصاویر ماهواره‌ای از قطعه ۴۱ بهشت‌زها؛ پارکینگ بر مزار اعدامشدگان [Satellite Images of Section 41 of Behesht-i Zahra; A Parking Lot on Top of the Graves of the Executed],” *BBC News* فارسی, August 20, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/c4g6ler1vgqo>.

21 Amnesty Iran, “Stop erasing evidence of 1980s crimes against humanity,” *X*, August 22, 2025, <https://x.com/AmnestyIran/status/1958882644751437985>.

Father: ‘My Sentence Is Death, Don’t Tell Mom Anything.’],” *Iranian UK* | ایرانیان انگلستان, August 4, 2023, <https://iranianuk.com/20230804123851019/>-عکس روز خالکوبی روی دست پدر - محمد مهدی کریمی حکم من - اعدام به مامان چیزی نگو.

careless narrative, which was conveyed by the agents of the regime – usually the alleged husbands of the executed women – became one of the foundations of a new perception of Islam and the oppression that Iranian society was going to face in the newly formed theocracy, which circulated through word-of-mouth.

Hossein-Ali Montazeri, an influential member of the clergy who was more lenient towards prisoners and sympathetic to their situation, wrote in his memoirs that he had asked to at least spare the “girls,” but the prison officials twisted his words, using them as an excuse to force the imprisoned young women into these marriages.²² Whether this ‘ritual’ happened regularly or not, rape has been a method of torture and repression in the prisons, before and after the Revolution.²³ More recently, the previous head of the Evin Prison has come forward with claims of such marriages. Based on what Hossein Mortazavi Zanjani says, these women were forcibly married to “prevent them from entering into heaven as virgins.”²⁴ Nevertheless, there is no evidence of such crimes in any other historical source or document. Ervand Abrahamian has written about how “repentant” women were “encouraged to marry eligible guards,” as part of the incentives offered to those renouncing their past, but sex between prisoners and guards was never condoned.²⁵

Aside from Mortazavi Zanjani’s claims, further evidence of the forced marriages before executions is the family members’ memory of when they received the *mahrieh* in worthless coins. *Mahrieh* is a significant amount of money, usually measured in gold coins, that the groom is obligated to pay the bride under the terms of marriage. Legally, it functions as a form of insurance in case of a divorce or the husband’s passing. Setting the amount of *mahrieh* is usually a point of pride for the bride’s family, even though it remains unpaid in most cases. In this regard, delivering such a small number of cheap coins as the *mahrieh* for the executed women was a calculated move to convey a sense of shame and dishonor to the victim’s family, which would ensure their silence regarding the matter. The theme of measuring human life in coins is a recurring one in this era, since the family of those who were executed by firing squad had to pay ‘bullet money’ to receive the bodies of their loved ones.

While the two cases are not quite comparable, they show how the families’ losses were reduced to small monetary amounts in an effort to cheapen the lives and memories of their loved ones and put more pressure on those who have survived.

In the same interview, Mortazavi Zanjani mentions a father who was given a small amount of cash when receiving the news of his daughter’s death, and how the experience made him suffer even more.²⁶ A distant acquaintance who raised her daughter as a single mother also received the grave news in such a manner, which led to her cardiac arrest and death. The problem is that while such memories have left a significant impact on society’s public memory, no one has commemorated or remembered what happened to these families and their loved ones through public history or any other form of historiography. Shame, pain, and oppression eventually prevented the families from speaking out about their loss and how the regime treated them when delivering the news. Chowra Makaremi, an anthropologist whose mother was executed during the summer of 1988, has worked on the politics of death and mass grave burials, a process which, she argues, was designed to ensure perpetual silence.²⁷ The image of the small changes used at the time in Iran is my way of remembering them in public history, signifying the paradoxically great value of these once-cheap coins (Figure 4).

Some efforts to bring those responsible for the mass executions to justice have been made outside of Iran. But they usually do not enjoy a broad collaboration with the families of the victims of the massacre, since many, particularly those still living inside the country, are subjected to the oppressive tactics of the Iranian regime. The Justice for Victims of the 1988 Massacre in Iran (JVMI) is one of these organizations that works against such oppressions. It describes its mission to advocate for the victims by holding meetings and conferences to push national and international institutions, such as the United Nations, to recognize the historical events and support the organization’s objectives.²⁸ Only limited information about their funding and resources is publicly available. As their website proclaims: “JVMI, which is based in London, was recently formed by a group of human rights lawyers, political personalities, former UN officials, former government officials, and former

22 Hossein-Ali Montazeri, *Diaries* (Pacoima: Ketab Corp, 2001), 350.

23 Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 106.

24 پشت صحنه گزارش رییس سابق زندان اوین: به دختران باکره تجاوز می‌کردند که بهشت نروند [Behind the Scenes of the Report; Former Head of the Evin Prison: They Raped the Virgin Girls So That They Wouldn’t Go to Heaven], https://iranwire.com/fa/videos/117240-پشت-صحنه-گزارش-رییس-سابق-زندان-اوین-به-دختران-باکره-تجاوز-می-کردند-که-بهشت-نروند.

25 Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 168.

26 پشت صحنه گزارش رییس سابق زندان اوین [Behind the Scenes of the Report; Former Head of the Evin Prison].

27 Chowra Makaremi, “State Violence and Death Politics in Post-Revolutionary Iran.” in *Destruction and Human Remains: Disposal and Concealment in Genocide and Mass Violence*, eds. Elisabeth Anstett and Jean-Marc Dreyfus (Manchester University Press, 2014), 183–203.

28 Iran 1988 Massacre, “About Us,” <https://iran1988.org/about-us/>.



Figure 4: Low-value coins commonly used at the time of the 1988 massacre. Credit: Author.

Iranian political prisoners.”²⁹ Most of these individuals are English or French politicians and lawyers, and international figures endorsing the organization are from various political spectrums. One of JVTI’s most important achievements is the detection of 59 mass graves all over the country, which has provided the families with helpful visual evidence from the sites.³⁰ In any case, seeking justice, even in small measures, has been mostly unsuccessful. For example, Hamid Nouri, a former Iranian official who was convicted in Sweden in 2022 for his role in the massacre, was recently exchanged with Swedish prisoners in Iran and released from prison.³¹

So far, public history has been the most effective method to commemorate the events and their effects on the Iranian psyche. One of the prominent examples is the song *Noon O Panir O Sabzi* (Bread and Cheese and Vegetable), written by

²⁹ Iran 1988 Massacre, “Official Launch: ‘Justice for Victims Of 1988 Massacre in Iran’—Geneva, September 2016,” <https://iran1988.org/official-launch-justice-victims-1988-massacre-iran-geneva-september-2016/>.

³⁰ Iran 1988 Massacre, “Interactive Map of Mass Graves from Iran’s 1988 Massacre (with Photos),” October 24, 2017, <https://iran1988.org/interactive-map-mass-graves-irans-1988-massacre-photos/>.

³¹ Victoria Bisset, “Iran and Sweden Announce Prisoner Swap Involving Convicted War Criminal,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/06/15/iran-sweden-prisoner-swap-hamid-nouri/>.

Shahryar Ghanbari and performed by two of the most popular Iranian singers in the diaspora, Dariush and Ebi. It captures the shock and grief of cultural and religious beliefs being used in justifying the massacres of this period. Minarets and blue tiles are both symbols of Iranian Islamic architecture, which the songwriter has consciously used in a paradoxical context. The minaret is the high structure that strengthens and projects the voice of the person calling for prayer, and blue tiles are embedded in ponds and fountains, carrying fresh and clear water, signifying purity and righteousness:

At the base of all minarets
the execution of the voice again
the death of the red rose again
again and again
The fire to the green forests
by the match of madness
From our blue tiles
fountains of blood have sprung up.³²

2 Another Closet, Another Story

Other excellent public examples of the practice include the making of documentaries by producers who typically record the history of their own family within the context of the massacres. The documentary *Hitch: An Iranian Story* by Chowra Makaremi made me look at my experience with public history differently.³³ Dealing with trauma and healing through documentary-making is not new; what makes this one special is the generational shift of expression by utilizing public history and the scale at which each generation seeks engagement. From semi-public history to fully developed public history, Iranians inside and outside of Iran have expanded the scope of their endeavors generationally. In the film, Makaremi goes on a quest to rediscover the events that led to the arrest, torture, and execution of her mother, Fatemeh. Fatemeh was arrested in Shiraz three years after the Revolution and remained in prison for seven years because she was a prominent member of the MEK who ran for an election in the organization, and her identity was known to the authorities. During that time, she endured the most horrific forms of physical and psychological torture. When her husband took Chowra and her brother and fled to

³² “*Noon O Panir O Sabzi*,” YouTube video, 9:30. Posted by “Dariush Eghbali,” December 19, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J47-knQbhyY>.

³³ Chowra Makaremi, “*Hitch: An Iranian Story*.” Alter Ego Production, 1:11:15. May 7, 2021. <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/330467?autoplay=1>.

France to protect the children, Fatemeh never saw her family again.

In the documentary, Chowra records the voices of family members such as her grandmother, an unidentified woman who is probably her aunt, her father, and her brother. She starts, however, with a notebook in which her late grandfather Aziz had written all he knew about Fatemeh's life in prison and her death, intending to give it to her children when they grew up. At the beginning of his narrative, which Chowra translated and published, Aziz writes about his wasted life and how he had lost two daughters during the 1988 massacre.³⁴ He emphasizes that in the last years of his life, writing about what happened to his daughters was the only way he could find solace. While it might seem like Aziz chose to process his trauma through the traditional method of historiography, his notebook can also be seen as a form of one-person oral history in which he attempts healing through a less-than-public history method when no interviewer could be trusted, especially since one aspect of oral history, if done well, is to help the survivors to heal.³⁵ Nevertheless, his method does not seek engagement, at least not an immediate one, which also signifies the fear his generation harbored throughout the events.

Chowra's father, however, went another way. As an artist and a painter, he decided to dedicate a closet to the memory of his wife, painting it blue – the color of Iran's sky – and writing *Hich* (Nothing) on it with red, which might have significance since Fatemeh was a revolutionary who later became disillusioned with the fight and her claim to her country as Aziz's narrative explains. Writing the word in red can signify a sense of despair in how a loved one's blood has come to nothing.³⁶ The closet, which was meant to remain empty, eventually became filled with everyday trinkets belonging to Fatemeh and others with similar fates: a few books holding names and information of those lost in the massacre, matchboxes, *tasbihs* (rosaries), *chadors* (full-body length scarves that some Muslim women use as veils), hand

watches, and other things that might seem worthless fill the gap in the historiography of the lives of those whose bodies were denied proper burials. In a way, the closet is a collection of objects that had constant contact with the bodies of executed loved ones. Many men from the pre-revolutionary era, for example, played with *tasbih* absent-mindedly or while praying, just as many women used *chadors* for praying and as a quick outfit cover-up. Both items – especially *chadors* – were known to carry the scent and aura of their owners and are honored instead as relics of the lost bodies. Chowra's father named it "The Museum," which is a step forward from a less-than-public history, limited to family members, to a semi-public history approach, in which he shares his wife's story with all those who have endured similar losses. As Chowra's brother points out in conversation with her, the way the family saves the memory of their mother for the future generations includes the unique footprint of those who collect these stories: "The subject is interesting, but it is also so deeply bound to your experience, to our experience.... I often think that, as the second generation of sorts, as the children of people who experienced these terrible things, we have to strike a balance. A balance between the two maxims."³⁷

Pointing out how their stories mix with those of their mother, he inadvertently identifies how a shared authority is formed during their public history practice. One scene in the documentary is particularly iconic in showcasing the shared authority: Chowra, who is deeply engaged in conversation with her father while touching a blue matchbox, claims that this matchbox, one of her mother's belongings, is sacred to her father. He rejects Chowra's claim, and they try to light a few of the matches to refute the sacredness of the object, which results in breaking the matches. He then carefully collects the pieces and puts them back in the box to store them safely in the closet. By doing so, they leave their marks on the object, which already holds the marks of her mother's life and the time that has passed since her death. This simple act separates the practice from monumental history, which is a rigid form of recording history, intending to overtly glorify it, and brings it more firmly into the realm of public history. Far from trying to glorify the events, this trend of public history functions as a form of resistance, which is pronounced in all the examples of those employing different degrees of public history in order to remember the victims of the revolutionary period (1979–89). Although the closet is not exhibited in a public space, the fact that it was filled with objects belonging to other families gives it a higher level of engagement than what Aziz originally sought.

³⁴ Chowra Makaremi, *Aziz's Notebook at the Heart of the Iranian Revolution*, trans. Renuka George (New Delhi: YODA Press, 2013).

³⁵ Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki, and Franca Iacovetta, eds., "Introduction," in *Beyond Women's Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century* (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 1–24, 8.

³⁶ The word *Hich* is significant in Iranian art since Parviz Tanavoli also made a series of sculptures containing the word. The collection was a form of protest art made to display the artist's discontent with contemporary politics and how they influenced art. The interpretation here of the word on the closet made by Chowra's father is the author's explanation and not necessarily what the word or color red were intended to mean by the artist: "Hich Piece by Parviz Tanavoli," 2021, <https://www.aparat.com/v/G2UBV>.

³⁷ Makaremi, *Hitch: An Iranian Story*.

The last example is Chowra, a second-generation family member, with her documentary, which seeks the highest levels of engagement and shared authority. Her approach to public history stems from her academic training as an anthropologist, as well as her position as a second-generation family member in diaspora, where she seeks to reestablish ties with her past.³⁸ Chowra, who grew up outside of Iran and mostly speaks French, is free from the kind of terror that the destroyed graves invoke in the families still living in the country. In a similar case, Maryam Zaree, whose parents were both activists before the Revolution and turned opposition against the regime after the Revolution, has produced the documentary *Born in Evin*.³⁹ Zaree and her mother ran away to Germany after they were released from prison, before 1988, but her father remained in prison for seven years, barely dodging a death sentence during the 1988 massacre. Also, Maryam's stepfather, born to survivors of the Holocaust, is a psychoanalyst who works on generational trauma, putting her in a unique position to work on a public history project of this nature. Both women are from the second generation and try to come to terms with what happened to their family members through public history methods of engagement.⁴⁰ Maryam explains how her mother's reluctance to talk to her about the events surrounding her birth and early life has contributed to the generational trauma she has experienced and the identity crisis it created for her. Chowra is also featured in the documentary and talks to Maryam about the generational silence and how vital it is for the second-generation survivors to break it and become empowered to deal with the trauma, building a successful generation that resists the forces that did their best to silence their parents. Mina, a London-based psychologist from the same background as the two other women, also talks to Maryam about her experience and her expert opinion on the matter. Chowra, with her French accent, Maryam, with her German accent, and Mina, with her English accent, show that while some of the second-generation survivors are raised in different cultures far away from where the traumatic events happened, they indeed inherit the trauma, share a strong bond, and have essential roles in dealing with it through public history methods.

38 A Critical Anthropology of Morals, "Chowra Makaremi," <https://static.ias.edu/morals.ias.edu/team/makaremi.html>.

39 Zaree, Maryam. "Born in Evin." Tubi video, 1:40:04.2019. <https://tubitv.com/movies/100004311/born-in-evin>.

40 Laura Döing, "Processing Iranian Revolution Trauma in Film," Deutsche Welle, February 13, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/born-in-evin-processing-the-trauma-of-the-iranian-revolution/a-47501767>.

3 "What Is Left"

The culmination of the second-generation and out-of-the-country public history efforts can be seen in the two "What Is Left" exhibitions in Stockholm, Sweden, on September 9, 2023, and in Cologne, Germany, on November 22–24, 2024. The first exhibit was held at the Arbetarnas bildningsförbund, the Workers' Educational Association's central building, and displayed coats, shoes, T-shirts, workout objects, hand watches, wills, and other handwritten notes and documents belonging to those killed by the current Iranian regime. The victims of the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, started in September 2022 – after the death of Mahsa Amini while in the custody of Iran's Morality Police –, the Aban Protests – in response to a sudden increase in the fuel price, 2019 –, the Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 – which was shot down by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on January 8, 2020 –, the massacre of 1988, and other political prisoners in Iran were all commemorated in the exhibit. Highlighting the connection between the outside and inside country endeavors, Soran Mansournia, a member of the Aban Families for Justice, said:

The members of the exhibition working group were able to connect, directly and indirectly, with some of the justice-seeking families. Despite the security challenges in Iran, upon receiving our message, they managed to send us mementos of their lost loved ones. In fact, it can be said that ninety percent of the works presented in this exhibition have reached us from inside Iran.⁴¹

The second exhibit, which commemorated the fifth anniversary of the Aban Protests in Iran, also showcased many personal items from those who were killed by the current regime of Iran. The exhibition was the result of a collaboration between the Aban Families for Justice, the Association of Families of Flight PS752 Victims, Free_Human, HAWAR-help, and the Kulturbunker Köln-Mülheim. The families of the victims of these atrocities, the families of the victims of the 1988 massacre, and a few of those who were in prison during the summer of 1988, were either present or sent personal objects to be displayed in the exhibit. Shirts, boots, bags, objects handcrafted by the prisoners, and even a milk bottle that belonged to the two-year-old Amirali Mousakazem, who was killed in the Woman, Life, Freedom protests in

41 آنچه باقی می‌ماند؛ نمایشگاهی از یادگاری‌ها و عکس‌های شماری از جانب‌دختران سیاسی- عقیدتی در ایران " [What Is Left; An Exhibition of the Keepsakes and Photos of those Killed in Iran Due to Their Political or Religious Beliefs], " September 12, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/c72emg56keo>.

Isfahan, were on display, along with the victims' images and symbolic bullets that killed them. The most heartbreaking part of this exhibition was arguably the section exhibiting the photos of the children who were murdered during the recent protests and adorned with small, colorful paper boats carrying their innocent souls elsewhere. Most importantly, the families gathered some of the stories of the suffering they endured after their loss and presented them in a book called *Aban Came*.⁴²

Mahboubeh Ramezani, the mother of Pezhman Gholipour, who was killed during the Aban Protests in 2019, and a member of the Iranian Mothers for Justice, present there, said: "Today, we have gathered at this exhibition not only to keep the memory of our loved ones alive but also to be their voice, the voice of justice."⁴³ During the two exhibitions, organizers and attendees compared these atrocities to the crimes committed by the Ku Klux Klan in the United States and asked the world to pay attention to what one of them described as Iran's Holocaust.

4 Conclusion

Iran's regime has started another round of massacres against Iranian protesters since the start of 2026. On December 28, 2025, protests erupted nationwide in response to another rise in the price of the U.S. dollar and worsening economic conditions.⁴⁴ Reza Pahlavi, the son of the last Shah, who lives in the United States, issued his first call for people to come out against the Islamic Republic on January 8, which led to more widespread protests.⁴⁵ The regime answered with full force, cutting off the internet and opening fire on the protesters all over the country. Reports from medical facilities showed bullets were predominantly shot at protesters' heads, chests, and abdomens.⁴⁶ By January 14, the estimated number of victims was over 12,000, and nearly as

many were arrested.⁴⁷ The image of the overflowing morgues filled social media, with body bags filling the streets, and families desperately looking for their loved ones among them, their cries filling the air when their search concluded. Iranians sharing and reposting these images and videos, along with the older videos of the victims dancing, laughing, and embracing life, even under oppression, are their primary attempts to record what is perhaps the largest massacre in Iran's modern history.⁴⁸ The estimated number of victims later reached between 20,000 and 36,500, with 33,000 arrested.⁴⁹ Reports also indicated that government agents raided the hospitals and either arrested those injured during the protests or murdered them by shots to the head, after medical intervention had already begun.⁵⁰ Families are once again forbidden from holding mourning rituals for their lost loved ones. Artists, however, have responded by capturing the horrific and heartbreaking images of mourning and sharing them on social media, becoming a voice for families who have yet to find their voice against these atrocities and seek justice for their loved ones.⁵¹ Officials have allegedly demanded high sums of money to release the bodies in some cases, which has evoked the memory of requisite bullet money in exchange for the bodies of

42 *Aban Came, A Collection of Short Stories*, [آبان شد، مجموعه داستان‌های کوتاه] (Ronak Publication, 2024).

43 Ronak Faraji, "آنچه باقی ماند" [What Is Left], *Radio Zamaneh*, November 28, 2024, <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/840469/>.

44 Omid Barin, "Iran's Economic Crisis, Political Discontent Threaten Regime," *Deutsche Welle*, January 1, 2026, <https://www.dw.com/en/irans-economic-crisis-political-discontent-threaten-regime/a-75350062>.

45 "Exiled Prince Calls on Iranians to Join Protesters in the Streets," *Iran International*, January 6, 2026, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202512291387>.

46 "Exclusive Interview: Physician Treating Protesters in Iran Describes Mass Casualties, Overwhelmed Hospitals," Center for Human Rights in Iran, January 12, 2026, <https://iranhumanrights.org/2026/01/exclusive-interview-physician-treating-protesters-in-iran-describes-mass-casualties-overwhelmed-hospitals/>.

47 Tucker Reals et al., "Over 12,000 Feared Dead After Iran Protests, as Video Shows Bodies Lined up at Morgue," *CBS News*, January 14, 2026, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-protest-death-toll-over-12000-feared-higher-video-bodies-at-morgue/>.

48 Soran Mansournia, *Instagram*, January 13, 2026, https://www.instagram.com/p/DTa8AYpDf-H/?img_index=2; Soran Mansournia, *Instagram*, January 13, 2026, https://www.instagram.com/p/DTdGbmDQtr/?img_index=1; irans.feminist.liberation et al., *Instagram*, January 13, 2026, https://www.instagram.com/p/DTdhfElkX3m/?img_index=1; Shima Babaei, *Instagram*, January 20, 2026, https://www.instagram.com/p/DTu3_dbDWuk/?img_index=1.

49 RFE/RL's Radio Farda, "UN Warns of Unprecedented Protest Death Toll as US 'Armada' Heads to Iran," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 23, 2026, <https://www.rferl.org/a/un-protests-death-toll-us-armada-iran/33657797.html>; Iran International's Editorial Board, "Over 36,500 Killed in Iran's Deadliest Massacre, Documents Reveal," *Iran International*, January 25, 2026, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202601255198?source=share-link>.

50 "Joint Civil Society Call for HRC Special Session on Mass Killings in Iran," Iran Human Rights, January 16, 2026, <https://iranhr.net/en/statement/80/>; Omid Barin, "Hospital Attack Highlights 'brutality' of Iran Clampdown," *Deutsche Welle*, January 9, 2026, <https://www.dw.com/en/hospital-attack-highlights-brutality-of-iran-clampdown/a-75454581>; Iran Human Rights, *Instagram*, January 17, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DTnJtj3DCjL/>.

51 Roshi Rouzbehani, *Instagram*, January 13, 2026, https://www.instagram.com/p/DTbfjYqgvvJ/?img_index=1; Illupoon, *Instagram*, January 13, 2026, https://www.instagram.com/p/DT8PciktFw/?img_index=1.

the executed during the revolutionary period.⁵² Arrests continue, and the fate of those in the prisons remains to be determined at the hands of the regime's prosecutors and courts.

Those who underwent the trauma of losing family members to revolutionary prisons employed public history in varied degrees and unique ways to express their grief and process their pain, evidently without any knowledge of or training in the field. As we saw, the closet became a safe and secure space for collection-building and forming a shared authority over the traumatic events of this era. In this way, resistance and healing happened simultaneously, while generation after generation sought bolder methods of doing public history and required higher levels of engagement, especially those who live outside of the country. That, however, is not to say that the second generation living in Iran has remained timid and less active. They have also found methods of remembering, especially through social media-generated public history, and the two communities have drawn upon and influenced each other considerably. One reason cited for the "What Is Left" exhibitions, for example, was to connect the "justice-seeking efforts" to the protests happening in Iran.

All the examples analyzed in this article show that out-of-the-country second-generation Iranians are the only ones who can showcase their stories in full-scale public history, both because of their distance from the oppressive authorities and because they inherited their parents' trauma, which is quite different from developing their own. However, those living in Iran have also become involved in these public or semi-public history endeavors, depending on their current situation and their proximity to the events. The tattoo of Mohammad Mehdi Karami's father is an illuminating case that shows how the continuance of such atrocities has caused the families of the victims to use public history more widely to defy the authorities. However, the unmitigated rage of Chowra – and others from her generation and location – leads her not only to demand engagement for her own work, but also for that of her father and her

grandfather. By doing this, she shows how the scale of engagement and shared authority expands from generation to generation and how public history becomes more important in expressing and healing from pain.

The exploration of examples from my family and their friends through oral history, documentaries made by the second-generation survivors, and other forms of public history, shows how the generational methods of dealing with trauma changed in conjunction with the conditions of oppression and fear of repercussions, which is related to the proximity to the events in time and geographical location. From the small semi-public "museum" created by Chowra's father, to the public, international "What Is Left" exhibitions, Iranians' use of public history methods, without any knowledge or training in the field, has become increasingly widespread, turning into one of their primary justice-seeking platforms.

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⁵² Dadban, *Facebook*, January 13, 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/dadban2021/>; iranrevolution, *Instagram*, January 14, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DTfgEQ8CMns/>; Kurdpafarsi, *Instagram*, January 12, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DTa0zevCt94/>.