

A FEW QUESTIONS FOR A. K. JABBARI

We have read the books his company has published, but never known the man behind them. In this rare interview with Dr. Ahmad Kamron Jabbari, president and founder of Mazda Publishers, Inc., a prestigious scholarly and trade publishing house here in California, our editor has tried to delve into his mind and find out why he took up this challenge nearly 26 years ago in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

In 1980, Dr. Jabbari was a professor of economics and management in Kentucky, a former aerospace engineer with two years of research at NASA to his credit. How he (re)discovered his “true profession” and established Mazda Publishers is an inspiring account of balancing one’s passion with the demands of circumstance.

Question: What motivated you to change your profession so radically, to go from being a college professor and aerospace engineer to what you are today?

Answer: I established Mazda Publishers, Inc., in 1980—a time of extreme political uncertainty—with the aim of publishing educational books and materials on Iranian culture and civilization. Now, twenty-six years, later, I am happy to say that my company has consistently excelled in the area of scholarly and trade publishing. We have produced quality texts, reference materials, literary works, and general interest books for both researchers and the public at large. The titles I have published explore a wide variety of topics such as politics, religion, history, language, and art and architecture. In addition, my company offers an array of imported works, reasonably priced and conveniently available for institutions, individuals, and the trade.

Q. Wasn’t it scary to abandon an already-established teaching profession and embark on a totally new and uncertain endeavour?

A. Let me back-track a little and tell you a story. As a child and then a teenager growing up in Tehran, I was always a passionate reader—it was part of me. When I was in 7th grade, I handwrote my own newspaper every week and hung it on a bulletin board outside my classroom. Also as a teenager in Tehran, I saw a motion picture called “The Devil’s Disciple” that had a profound impact on me. This movie, which starred Burt Lancaster, Kirk Douglas, and Sir Lawrence Olivier, was based on a play written by George Bernard Shaw. You can still find copies of this book or the DVD in local stores here. The story is about the American independence movement and how the revolutionaries defeated the British army in the face of seemingly unbelievable odds. There are three main characters in this novel; a local priest—a man of the cloth, non-violent—who tells his parishioners not to get involved with the partisans; an activist in the freedom movement who denounces the church and all that it stands for, and the British General Bourgoyne. Through a series of events, the priestly father is transformed into a revolutionary too. In the final scene, with his comrade-in-arms about to be hung at the gallows, he attempts a rescue, putting him face to face with the British general. Puzzled, the general asks the former priest why a man of God would take up arms and breaks his vow of nonviolence. The priest replies, “Men find their true professions in the hour of trial.” This is the statement that remained with me. It is not what society or our family upbringing lead us to, but the hidden

passion within us that awakes at the right time and place, that determines why we choose to do what we do.

Q.: So, you actually had the passion to be a publisher from the 7th grade?

A: Yes. But you know, had I chosen to major in literature in high school rather than mathematics, I would have become a laughing stock among my friends. Back then in Iran, smarter kids were supposed to become either engineers or doctors. Choosing any other field of study would have been interpreted as a lack of intelligence on my part. So, I majored in mathematics, which eventually landed me two degrees in engineering and one doctorate in mathematical economics. But my passion for publishing stayed with me.

Q: Which High school did you attend?

A. : I enrolled in Firooz Bahram High School in Tehran, a private Zoroastrian school. It was there that I became very much interested in ancient roots and our Iranian/Persian heritage. This awareness has stayed with me till today, and if we, the Iranians, are going to survive, we must maintain and safeguard our ancient heritage with all our power. Our history, language, and literature are the three main reasons that will ensure the survival of our glorious civilization XXX. I am afraid we no longer have much scientific research in Iran to brag about; the scientists that our country once produced, such as Khwarizmi, Avicenna, Razi, and Omar Khayyam, among many others, are a thing of the past. We, and by that I mean Iranians, have not yet had a Noble laureate in any scientific field; except of course for Dr. Ebadi in a non-related field.

Q: Is that why you continued to publish “A Survey of Persian Art,” which was started in 1930 by the great American archaeologist, Arthur Pope?

A. Well, yes, that is one reason. I managed to finish this project that was started 60 years ago where no other prestigious press was able or willing to finish it. I feel very proud to have done this, and I hope my fellow countrymen and women appreciate this accomplishment, especially in these times when the name of Iran/Persia is not mentioned with respect and honor.

Q: Do you, as an American publisher in the United States, feel an increase in censorship on what you print?

A. We are living in very uncertain times following the atrocities of September 11. But as for censorship, no, not at all. As a publisher, the only “censorship” I sense is that of a self-imposed censorship by commercial presses that, for economic reasons, adhere to a certain political thinking. But fortunately, we have elections every four years and with that we always hope for a new beginning. That is another valuable freedom in this country and often not appreciated. We decide what we want to publish, not the government. If readers like what we publish, then they buy it.

Q: Do you publish books other than ones on Iran?

A: Of course. I am mainly interested in the non-Arab Middle East, as well as Central Asia, where the influence of Iranian civilizations is strongly felt.

Q. Can you give us the name of one of your most recent publications?

A: We take pride in everything that we publish, whether it is a cookbook or a poster or a sophisticated work of scholarship. Apart from the “Survey of Persian Art” that I mentioned above, I recently published the memoirs of Professor Richard N. Frye, the world-renowned scholars of Iranian history. Last year, I invited him to California for a series of lectures. This book is about to be sold out and I am planning a new printing by this fall. I have also co-published with a few other organizations, among them the Royal Ontario Museum of Canada, Personally Oriented Ltd. of Japan, and the Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation in New York.

Q: The profit margin on the books you published would not appear to be as high as those published by more “commercial” houses. How do you manage to keep afloat, especially with the larger university presses with substantial state and private funding snapping at your heels?

A: In addition to income from sales of our books, I rely on grants from public and private institutions. However, I will not allow such funding ever to compromise the material published, nor will I accept grants that restrict our editorial freedom.

Q: Can you tell us names of some of the organizations that have awarded grants to Mazda Publishers?

A: Surely. The J. Paul Getty Trust in Los Angeles, the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT, Harvard University, the Hebrew University Mutual Funds, the Graduate Society Foundation, the British Institute of Persian Studies, the Yad Avi-Ha-Yishur Foundation, the Robert H. and Clarice Smith Center for the History of Art, the University of Michigan, The University of Pennsylvania, the Department of History at UCLA, the Royal Ontario Museum, and the Ilex Foundation, to name a few. As I mentioned earlier, this year we finally received a sizeable donation from an Iranian individual. I hope this trend will continue, and that those Iranians who have gained substantially from the recent boom in the U.S. economy will donate generously to the institutions of their choice. Let me also remind the donors to give generously to publishers and institutions in Iran. It is one way to stop what is known as “brain drain.” Iranian institutions in Iran need such donations more than their counterparts in the United States.

Q: Do you publish only in English or in Persian as well?

A: As the years pass, fewer and fewer Iranians living abroad will know how to read or write in Persian. I think this is a shame. However, what would be worse is if the second and third generations forget their culture and traditions. Accordingly, the best way to disseminate knowledge is through the language these young people know best—and that is English. Of course, what is printed must be intelligent and not the baseless articles and gossip that I see so often printed in many of these Iranian publications. They must inform truthfully, not copy someone else’s gossip. What is important is the survival of the Persian language and literature. That can only be achieved if Iranian universities receive outside support. If they continue to

produce quality literature, etc., which can be translated into English, then Iran's intellectual contribution to the world will continue to endure as in the past, by such great intellectuals as Omar Khayyam, Hafez, Rumi, Sadi, Ferdowsi, Razi, and Avicenna, to name just a few.

Thank you for giving us this opportunity to chat.