

In the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War, a young Iranian soldier named Ahmad Salimi was severely injured by chemical weapons used by the Iraqi army. For a long time, his emotional pain ran as deep as the wounds to his eyes and lungs. What brought him back to the world was music.

From Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, this is *Trending Globally*. I'm Sarah Baldwin. Today, Narges Bajoghli, anthropologist, filmmaker, and postdoctoral fellow at the Watson Institute, will read *Learning to Play by Ear in Iran* by Ahmad Salimi.

Years ago during the Iran-Iraq War, Iraqi war planes drop mustard gas and nerve agents on my battalion. I was completely burned with blisters all over my body. I couldn't see anything for months, and since then, I've had over 50 operations on my eyes. My lungs were severely damaged. They functioned at only 45%.

I also had a lot of emotional problems. I was angry all the time. I just wanted to be alone. It was hard because even after I was married, I didn't know how to control this deep helplessness, fear, and anger. I was taking a lot of medicine, too, for all of my injuries and for my anger.

I began to see a psychiatrist, but it wasn't helping much. So a doctor friend of mine in Tehran told me to try music as therapy. The idea made me nervous because music wasn't fully OK at the time in Iran, especially for those of us who had fought in the war. We were supposed to be soldiers and defenders of the revolution, and music was seen as not being proper or serious enough. But I always loved music. We even hired a band for our wedding illegally.

I was open to the doctor's suggestions, but I wasn't sure how others would feel about it. There was a great teacher, Maestro Malek, who not only taught music classes but also had his own workshop where he made the santur, a traditional Iranian instrument, and it was located near my father's grocery store. The Maestro also had a dairy farm next to his music store, which was where we bought the milk to sell at the grocery.

One day, when I was at his dairy to pick up the milk, the Maestro asked me do you know why I have the best milk in town? Because the cows hear music every day. It makes the cows eat more and then produce more milk. It also makes them live longer.

I thought to myself maybe the doctor was right about the power of music, so I signed up to take classes with him. The Maestro's students were mostly young people. I was the oldest in the class. And since my lungs were so badly damaged, I coughed a lot. I worried that my constant coughing was bothering the other students. So I went only to one class, but that was enough to make me fall in love. I wanted to learn to play this instrument.

We didn't have enough money back then to buy a santur of my own. But I had a gold wedding ring, and since my wife was pregnant with our son and her wedding ring had become too small for her, she was willing to sell both. We sold the rings for \$15,000 tomans, which was a lot back then. And with that I bought the instrument.

I arranged it so that I was at Maestro Malek's dairy farm when the classes started. I would go earlier to pick up the milk from my father's store and would delay in getting back. I'd stand outside the window of the class and just listen. The teacher had no idea I was out there.

I'd come back home and try to recreate what I heard through that window. My poor wife, I had no idea what I was doing, and I was just making noise. I know I gave her lots of headaches in those first few months, but I would come home every day and try to mimic what I had heard in the class.

Because I was only hearing the lessons from the window and because my eyesight was so bad after the bombing, I couldn't see how the students had positioned the instrument in front of them. But that's how I learned, just by listening and try to recreate the sounds. It took me about six months to learn the notes.

One day Maestro Malek heard that I had learned how to play the santur, and he insisted on hearing me play. I was really far too embarrassed to play in front of him, but he insisted. He came to our house, and I played. When I finished, I was nervous for him to speak.

This is the first time in my life that I have seen someone learn the santur in this way, he said, and to play the instrument the wrong way around. Until that moment, I didn't know that I had played it wrong. After that I learned the right way as well. I fell in love with it so much that I even began to compose songs and later perform concerts.

Learning to play music really did affect my mood. I no longer had to take anything to control my anger. But after 2003, when the sanctions against Iran worsened, I stopped having access to the medicine I needed and my health deteriorated. I had three cornea transplant operations in just one year because they didn't have the medication to keep my body from rejecting the transplants.

I'm doing better now, but because of all of this, I haven't played publicly in years. I still play at home most days. It helps keep my mood up, and it brings joy to my family. When they see me play, I can sense that they stop worrying about me and that gives me relief.

That was Narges Bajoghli reading *Learning to Play by Ear in Iran*. This essay, translated from the Persian, appeared in the April 8, 2016 *New York Times Sunday Magazine*.

Narges, who is Ahmed Salimi, and how did he come to tell you his story?

Sure. Ahmad Salami is a survivor of chemical warfare as we laid out in the article. About nine years ago, I began to do research on survivors of chemical warfare in Iran. There are about 100,000 survivors of chemical warfare today, and they all date back to the eight-year Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s.

So he is currently 45 years old, and he was exposed to these chemicals when he was about 17.

He was a soldier at 17?

Yes. He tried to work for a few years after he was exposed to the chemicals, but about 15 years ago, he had to retire because he just-- his health wouldn't allow him anymore. So I met him through doing these oral history interviews for survivors of chemical warfare.

How did you find him?

Well, I began to work with veterans who themselves after the war had become physicians. And a few of these physicians were working on survivors of chemical warfare. At the time in the early 2000s, very few people within the country in Iran and then in the world were paying attention to survivors of chemical warfare. So these physicians were really some of the only ones who were trying to figure out what was happening to these survivors and how to best help them and everything that was going on medically.

So when I linked up with them, they were also keen in creating a peace museum in Tehran, and it would be the first peace museum in the country. And all of it was focused around the use of chemical warfare and biological warfare around the world and how there needs to be a movement against these. So with those people who were creating the peace museum as well as the physicians who were working, I was linking up with their patients and the people that they had been working with.

They had me do the oral history project side of it because since I was a social scientist, I could come up with figuring out-- one of the things that the doctors had figured out was that after about 20 years of exposure to these chemical weapons, the survivors were developing very complex cancers, and so they wanted to have their stories recorded before they unfortunately would lose their lives. And so that was my role in all of that, and through that I met Ahmad Salami. And then after that became very good friends with him and his family.

I was going to ask you do you know where he is now. It sounds like you have an enduring friendship.

Yes. I made a film about him and his family. And then I've just kept in very close touch with them. And he has two healthy sons, and one of them is now married and the other one is in college. And, yeah, they live right outside of Tehran.

And did you-- have you collected all these stories into a publication or--

For these stories, not yet. I'm hoping to work on that for my second book. I'm actually in a conversation to create a media project around these survivors because I do think a lot of this also is visual and needs to be seen and by a wider audience than just within academia. But then from all of the interviews that I have collected, I also want to turn that into my second book.

Well, we'll wait for that impatiently.

Thank you.

Did you-- you conducted these interviews in Persian--

Yes.

And you translated?

Yes.

You did this. So in that process of taking the Persian and rendering it in English, was anything lost or gained?

What was that like for you?

In translation, things always are lost, but at the same time, I thought it was-- in this piece in particular for the *New York Times Magazine*, they have word limits and things like that. And so I had to work very closely with the editors because the story was much longer, and we had to fit it into their piece. But I think that the editors did a really great job in making sure that all the key elements of the story stayed in there.

In general, though, I do spend a lot of time when I'm doing translation of these sorts of interviews and stories to try to make sure that even though specificities of language are lost that the emotion and the essence of what the interviewee is saying to me it gets translated into English. And so I try very hard to maintain it in that way.

That's a lot of work, and it's an important piece of that work. And why do you think this series of stories is important? Do Western listeners benefit from hearing them?

Well, I would hope so. I think there are a few things. One is that since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran has been through both actions in Iran and outside has been vilified for many Westerners and especially in the United States. And I know that there are political reasons for all of that, but I do think, especially when it comes to issues like chemical warfare and when it comes to issues that can affect people in any situation in which war exists, those are stories that need to be heard the world over.

Because Ahmad was a soldier, but these chemical bombs were dropped on civilian areas in both Iran and Iraq by the Iraqi army. And those are stories that I think everyone needs to hear because these are weapons that can be used at any point unfortunately, and that's-- there are-- there have been other sorts of weapons developed since the 1980s that could do far more damage. And I think that these are-- one of the things about working on a war that happened so long ago that very few people remember is that unfortunately when wars end and journalists stop paying attention to them, they-- we also stop paying attention to them.

But really one of the things that I've learned is that the really devastating thing about war is how many long-term consequences it has on a society, and those are things that I think you need to stick with. You need to stick with those stories for a while. And so that's my hope in bringing these stories about is to show that even though this war ended over 25 years ago, people are still suffering the consequences.

Well it's very important work, and we're so grateful to you for coming in to read today. And I hope you'll come back often and retest again.

Thank you so much, and thank you for having me.

But the great master said I see no best in kind but in degree. I gave a various gift to each, to charm, to strengthen, and to teach. These are the three great chords of might, and he whose ear is tuned aright will hear no discord in the three but the most perfect harmony.

This has been *Trending Globally*, politics and policy, a biweekly discussion bridging research, politics, and policy to address today's critical global challenges. If you enjoyed today's conversation, we hope you'll subscribe to the podcast on iTunes, SoundCloud, and Stitcher. For more information, go to Watson.Brown.edu.