

From Iran to Israel: Translator Orly Noy

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [April 17, 2013](#) issue



Orly Noy emigrated to Israel from Iran as a child during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. She has worked for All for Peace radio, a station with a staff of Israelis and Palestinians, and she has produced the first translations of modern Iranian novels into Hebrew. Recently she taught Hebrew at the University of South Florida.

Why did your family emigrate to Israel?

It had to do with us being Jewish, of course. My parents always say that they would have done it one day, even if there had not been a revolution in Iran. Somehow I doubt it.

How did you begin translating?

It was completely an accidental thing. About four years ago, I was looking something up on Google, and I typed in “Farsi literature” in Hebrew. Google answered back in Hebrew, “Did you mean Russian literature?” Google did not recognize such a thing as Farsi literature in Hebrew. Google has no sense of humor; it was not joking with me. It just didn’t recognize the term.

What did you translate and why?

The natural first choice was *My Uncle Napoleon*, by Iraj Pezeshkzad. It is probably the most popular modern novel in Farsi literature. It is a social satire written in 1970, before the revolution. A very popular television series in Iran is based on that book, and Iranians know by heart lines from that series. When we left Iran at the beginning of the revolution, my mother actually grabbed a copy of that book in the midst of all the chaos and brought it with her to Israel.

A publisher came to see me about the second book, which was *The Colonel*, by Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, who is considered one of the best Iranian novelists. He still lives and writes in Iran. His book has actually never been published in Iran or in Farsi, because it is such a critical book. It has been published in German, English and now Hebrew. The book is very dark. It examines what happened as the revolution turned against its own children. It is a story about an ex-colonel in the shah's army whose children took part in various groups that were part of the revolution. All of them paid a dear price. It is eye-opening about what happens to great ideologies when they go bad. In that sense I think it is very relevant book for Israelis.

What makes it relevant?

Israelis and Iranians have much more in common than people think. We are talking about two ancient peoples that, in a way, relive their glorious past and are not able to face their new reality. The lesson is very relevant to Israelis because I think the Zionist movement needs to reexamine its past. What has become of this great ideology and how has it materialized on the ground in Israel?

What has been the response to these translated books in Israel?

I have been thrilled. They both got incredible coverage and a lot of reviews. Of course, they have an element of being exotic. But that's OK—whatever can get Israelis to look at Iranians as human beings who tried to take their destiny into their own hands and make something better for themselves and for their children—though the revolution backfired very badly. It is important to me that Israelis see Iranians not as crazy fanatics threatening to destroy the world, but as human beings whose attempts to make something better took a very sad direction.

What did you learn about your Iranian heritage from translating?

Immigrants tend to romanticize their homeland, especially if you are in exile and you cannot go back. Translating *The Colonel* rescued me from that romanticizing view. It

helped me to face Iran as a very troubled place with a very difficult political and social reality. I always felt 100 percent Iranian and 100 percent Israeli, but this work put more content into my Iranian identity.

What was it like to grow up as an Iranian in Israel?

It was much harder to immigrate from a Muslim country because of the fundamentalist mentality that Israelis have toward Arab and Muslim culture. To leave my Iranian identity and master Hebrew very quickly was a matter of survival. For many years, I blocked as much of my Iranian identity as I could. I wouldn't allow my parents to play Iranian music in the house when my friends came over, for example. As I became older and wiser I reconnected with my Iranian roots.

How does translating connect with your work for peace?

As with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, much of the Israeli-Iranian conflict is driven by ignorance. You need to meet your neighbors and see how they live and deconstruct the superficial image that you have of the "other."

Do you have hope that this is happening?

Strangely enough, I am more hopeful about the Iranian future than the Israeli one. The Iranians are at least willing to admit there is a problem. They are trying in their limited ways to do something about it. The Israelis are very far from even admitting how deep the problem really is. They have fallen into a very comfortable numbness. They refuse to admit what has become of their ideology, Zionism. For 65 years, we have not found the way to fulfill it without violating fundamental values of justice, humanity and morality—to the point that we now actually need to choose between a democratic and a Jewish state. The constant hostility toward us in our geopolitical setting has turned us into an isolated country, with very worrying racist and fascist elements that keep getting stronger. Unable to look bravely in the mirror, the majority of the Israelis blame the entire world, and of course the Palestinians, for our dire reality. Such conduct, unfortunately, doesn't leave much hope for change.